RHODA.

A NOVEL.

VOL. II. PART I.

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A NOVEL.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"THINGS BY THEIR RIGHT NAMES;"

AND "PLAIN SENSE."

" I teach the useful science to be good." *Pope.*

" Pour réussir par les ouvrages d'imagination, il faut peut-être, presenter une morale facile au milieu des mœurs sévères; mais au milieu des mœurs corrumpues le tableau d'une morale austere est le seul qu'il faille constamment offrir."

Stael, de la Litterature.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

PART I.

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RHODA.

CHAP. I.

"Ne'er did Grecian chisel trace
A Nymph, a Naïad, or a Grace,
Of fairer form, or lovelier face."

Scott.

THE ride proved extremely dull. Her companions were as little interesting, as they were familiar with her; and the honour that was done her, by Lady Morris having interested herself in her amusement, was all the advantage that she derived from the distinction.

Resolved to be her own mistress for the rest of the morning, the moment that she alighted from her horse, she ran up to her own room, bolted the door, and began to devour the contents of Frances's letter, with an avidity, but the

more eager for the delay that had been imposed.

In this precious epistle she found every thing that good sense, rightness of heart, and sincere friendship could give: she found even more—the overflowings of the most ardent passion; for Frances had added to her own kindnesses, a few lines written by Mr. Ponsonby to Mr. Wyburg, where the fond lover had expressed all that he could express, of the tumultuous feelings—the hopes—the fears, that Rhoda's removal from Byrhley had occasioned him.

"And shall I not live for such a man?" thought Rhoda. "Shall the contempt of a Lady Morris, or the cold-hearted machinations of a Mrs. Strictland, turn me aside from the path that my heart loves, and my reason approves? No, my dear friends; my probationary years shall be passed where you say that they ought to be passed;—but I will return to you, unchanged by place or circumstance, and more worthy of your

love than I could have been, had I not known, experimentally, how little worth, in comparison, is all that the world can give!"

In this virtuous, this glowing moment, Rhoda began to write to her friend. The letter was all affection—all generous disdain of glitter and toy—all wise preference of the true, the solid, and the good—all self-congratulation, that she *could* be so wise—so moderate, amidst so many temptations to the contrary.

"Your Rhoda," said she, triumphantly, "will not prove an Atalanta!—The golden apple shall not turn her aside from her course. Tell our dear scholar so, and bid him admire my learning much, but my heart more. If I do not *yet* bid you tell him that my heart is his, my reserve does not proceed from doubt of myself, but from my knowledge of human nature. Which of us loves the blessing that comes too easily?"

In the indulgence of this self-complacency, this self-confidence, and the re-

petition of the feelings, a thousand ways varied in the expression, Rhoda was so wholly engrossed, that she adverted not to the lapse of time, nor heard the gentle tap of Wilson, that summoned her to her toilet; but the louder intimation of Mrs. Strictland, who saw with alarm the precious moments dedicated to the sacred duty, fly rapidly away unused, compelled Rhoda to huddle up her papers, and open the door to the intruders.

She saw with surprise that Mrs. Strictland was in full dinner array, and heard with dismay, that the last summons to that important ceremony had already sounded.

"How can you be so inattentive to forms?" said Mrs. Strictland. "How can you be so forgetful of the place which, as *yet*, you hold in society? If you were married, indeed—if you were of consequence, there is sometimes no ill effect in making a whole company wait—but you can hope for no such respect; and to come in when every body

is seated at table, as if you had just thrown on your things, or had waited for the gratuitous assistance of some other person's attendant, is what will never contribute to your advancement; and then to begin, with shame, to take the lowest place, making awkward apologies, and unable, through the whole dinner-time, ever afterwards to acquit yourself with grace or dignity:—this will never do, indeed, my dear;—you will never make one step in the world by such manners."

"I have no great ambition to do that," said Rhoda; "but, indeed, I am very sorry that I am so late, and will not be so again. Oh, pray, don't leave me! I never can appear; indeed, I cannot, if I am to come in alone."

"It is impossible that I should stay," replied Mrs. Strictland. "You know, my dear, that even Lady Renkin takes place of me, even if Lady Morris was not to consider Lady Randolf—and now Lady Belmont is arrived, we are all no-

thing; so that, if I were not to be ready, the best I could hope for would be a hurrying message, to say that dinner waited. I would not that such a thing should happen, for the world: it makes one lose all one's dignity, so you must make the best of it; but above all things, don't come in fluttered, and as if you were out of breath."

And away hurried Mrs. Strictland.

Poor Rhoda was in despair; and half sick with apprehension how she should acquit herself in a matter, which Mrs. Strictland represented as being so important, she could not endure the faddling of Mrs. Wilson; but totally regardless at that moment of the effects of her dress, she burst from her hands, just as she exclaimed, "Dear ma'am, you won't go down stairs such a figure!"

All Mrs. Strictland's cautions must have proved fruitless; for Rhoda would undoubtedly have appeared fluttered and out of breath, had not fortune stood her friend.

As she entered the hall at one door, she saw Lord Randolf enter it at the other.

"My dear Miss Strictland," said he, "is not every body gone into the dining-room?"

"Every body but your lordship and myself," said Rhoda; "and if I had not met you, my lord, I believe that I should not have made my appearance at all."

"We shall keep each other in countenance," said Lord Randolf; and taking Rhoda's hand, he led her into the dining-room.

"We are so ashamed!" said he, affecting to hide his face with his hand. "Will you put us into a corner?"

"Oh pray, come to your usual seat, my lord," said Lady Morris.

"Oh no—the naughty children must sit together," said Lord Randolf. "I must not desert my sister culprit."

And leading Rhoda, with an air of gallantry and respect, to a vacant chair, he took his place by her.

"What a happy state of fortune!" thought Mrs. Strictland. "Rhoda could never, in any other circumstance, have had so much effect!"—and she glanced her eye round, on the several newly-arrived gentlemen-guests, who sat at the table, to see *how much;* dwelling the longest on Sir James Osbourne, whom she had very peculiarly marked as the object of her projected machinations. Indeed the glow which mingled bashfulness, and conscious beauty, gave at that instant to Rhoda's complexion, made her look so lovely, that every masculine eye present was at the same moment fixed upon her face, and she heard uttered, in a tone of voice the most agreeable which she thought she had ever heard in her life, although little above a whisper—

"Pray is it one of Lord Randolf's *privileges* to be the fellow-culprit of that lady?—If so, were I he, I would give up all the rest to secure that one!"

Lord Randolf soon made use of his situation, to let Rhoda into the names

and rank of the various guests, who had added so numerously to the company of the day before; and directing her eye to the gentleman whose voice had already reached her ear in such flattering strains,

"Do you know who that is?" said he.

"Oh, I know nobody," said Rhoda.

"But you must have heard of Lord William St. Quintin?" said Lord Randolf.

"Oh, yes," said Rhoda; "but not much I think to his advantage."

"What have you been told against him?" said Lord Randolf.

"Nothing particular against him," replied Rhoda, blushing; as she recollected the only disparaging imputation that had been laid to his charge. "But is he not fastidious—versatile?"

"No more fastidious, I suppose, than becomes a man of refined taste;—nor more versatile than any other man would

probably be, who found himself well received, change as often as he would."

"Is this praise, or satire?" said Rhoda.

"More perhaps *warning* than either," replied Lord Randolf. "Lord William has pleased so many, that some there must have been, who must have thought it a recommendation that his regards were not more stationary; and there may be others, who may think it hardly worth their trouble to gain what they are morally certain they shall not retain."

"Of these two kinds," said Rhoda, "which does your lordship think the wisest?"

"Does Miss Strictland ask me, as *doubting?*" said Lord Randolf.

"No," returned Rhoda; "but after what your lordship has said, how comes it that he is so much the god of every body's idolatry — that he makes and unmakes goddesses at his pleasure—

that to please him is the first object of a laudable ambition—and that he is the charm and soul of every society?"

"I discover my good sister Morris's pencil in that drawing," replied Lord Randolf; "but though the colouring is something overcharged, the picture is not without a likeness."

"But, can it be," said Rhoda, "that a person can be so universally liked, who deigns to honour scarcely any body with this approbation, in return—and that an opinion, which varies with every change of personal humour, can confer honour, or inflict disgrace?"

"See him—hear him," replied Lord Randolf, smiling. "He 'can please the ear, and make the worse appear the better reason.'"

"But all is false and hollow?" said Rhoda. "Does your lordship mean so?"

"Not precisely so," returned Lord Randolf; "neither is all sterling, to

which at times he condescends to put his stamp."

"If I do not interrupt what is better even than Sir Frampton's wines," said Lord William St. Quintin to Lord Randolf, "will your lordship allow me to drink a glass of Madeira with you?"

Rhoda started on such a sensible proof of the vicinity of the person, whose merits and demerits she had been discussing so freely; and allowed the accommodation, at least in this instance, of the custom which made whispers the polite mode of enjoying society. She had not, however, yet arrived at the well-bred effrontery of suffering an act of social kindness to be only a *momentary* interruption of a strain of censure.

"Lord William must effectually have stopped your mouth, my lord," said she to Lord Randolf, the moment that he had drank his wine. "Pray, let us find some other subject."

"This will not be a solitary instance,"

replied Lord Randolf, smiling, "in which you will find that Lord William can silence censure, without deserving praise."

"Why," thought Rhoda, "should Lord Randolf wish to prejudice me against Lord William St. Quintin? I will not be prejudiced. I will judge for myself."

And from this instant, Lord William became an object of interest with Rhoda.

She now began to consider a little more attentively the new faces with which she was surrounded, and saw more than one which prepossessed her in their favour.

"That is a very pretty woman," said Rhoda to Lord Randolf.

"Lady Harriet Delamaine," returned he; "she is, indeed, very pretty, and would be very charming, if Lady Belmont would permit her; but she does so puff her and praise her to every young man of fortune, that the poor girl does not know which way to look, and is at

the same time so afraid of incurring her mother's displeasure, for *not making the best of herself*, that she displays all her talents upon every occasion, and follows St. Paul's rule, 'of being all things to all men,' so faithfully, that, in fact, she is nothing to any one."

"Upon my word, my lord," said Rhoda, "you are very severe. I shall be afraid of you."

"My dear Miss Strictland," replied he, "do not be afraid of me—be afraid of yourself;—you are in a new world, full of shoals and quicksands. Do not think ill of me, if I endeavour to shew you a little of the *carte du pays*."

"Then, pray, my lord, tell me who is that gentleman to whom Mrs. Strictland has paid such unwearied attention all dinner-time?"

Lord Randolf looked at Rhoda, as if to discover whether she was quite so ignorant as she affected to be; but seeing nothing beyond simple curiosity in her face, he replied,

"That is Sir James Osbourne, the object of every mother's vows who has daughters to dispose of; it is agreed on all hands, that it is quite intolerable he should not marry. The last of his family, in the direct line, society demands from him the continuance of it. Master of a large fortune, he ought to call in the aid of female taste, to teach him to spend it; but above all, it is a shame that the finest family jewels, which a commoner can boast, should lie neglected in their cases, when they might shine with so much lustre in the hair, and on the bosom of a fair lady. Do you not think such arguments irrefragable—and that the man who does not yield to them, ought to be excluded from human society, as an irrational creature?"

"What effect have they had upon Sir James?" asked Rhoda.

"Apparently none at all," replied Lord Randolf. "On all sides the insensible Sir James appears to be invul-

nerable. Once or twice, indeed, he has shewn some little inclination towards being convinced—but he is one of those wise people who can find so many arguments on each side of every question, that they never come to any decision at all; and having escaped unhurt through the fiery regions of eighteen to thirty, he may in the colder atmosphere of more than forty, reasonably suppose himself safe."

"But has Sir James no other attractions, beyond those which you have mentioned?" said Rhoda.

"None that I ever *heard* of," replied Lord Randolf.

"Any that you *know* of?" said Rhoda.

"As to attractions, I cannot say," returned he; "but he has certain qualities, that are not quite insignificant—he has good sense, good nature—is a man of honour, and has the manners of a gentleman."

"But these make no part of his distinctions, I suppose?" said Rhoda.

"Why should they?" said Lord Randolf, with a smile; "they can make no part of a wife's happiness, you know."

Rhoda, who had thus become familiarized with Lord Randolf, and felt a relief and support from the frank and cordial manner in which he conversed with her, changed with regret the dining for the drawing-room, where she found herself an object of severe scrutiny with the newly-arrived guests. Lady Belmont, in particular, fixed on her an eye so penetrating, and so little benevolent, that she shrunk from its research, and withdrew to the shelter of Lady Randolf's working-frame. Here, while she seemed to busy herself in contemplating the pattern of the work, she heard Lady Belmont, who seemed not very solicitous to speak low, say to Lady Renkin,

"Pray who is she?—I never met her any where before."

"Nor any body else, I believe," replied Lady Renkin. "I really can give your ladyship but little information:—

some relation of Mr. Strictland's, that Mrs. Strictland has taken upon her to produce, and give consequence to ;—but I don't think she'll take."

"She seems to have made some progress here, however," replied Lady Belmont. "I was quite sorry for the poor girl, when she came in so *mal-à-propos* to dinner. I wonder that she was not looked quite out of countenance. Every gentleman's eye was upon her; and Lord William could not keep his from her face all dinner-time. If she had been my daughter, I think I should have been tempted to have beaten her, for making herself so conspicuous. Harriet would have died of such an exhibition."

"So, I am sure, would my daughters," returned Lady Renkin: "but this is what is called country modesty."

Rhoda, ashamed, angry, and provoked, was about to have taken refuge in her own room, when meeting Lady Randolf at the door,

"Where are you running, my dear

Miss Strictland?" said that lady. "Pray don't let us lose your company, this evening, as we did all morning. I never caught a glimpse of you from breakfast till dinner."

"And then, it seems," said Rhoda, "that I had better not have shewn myself."

"Come," said Lady Randolf, smiling, "I see how it is. Some of these impertinent people have vexed you; but you must not suffer your peace and your gaiety to be at the mercy of such. It is quite impossible to bridle the tongues of others; but we may teach ourselves to be indifferent to what they say."

"I should, indeed, wish to be above all that they can say."

"That is rather a proud word, my dear," replied Lady Randolf, "and betrays the very malady to which you pretend to be superior. Pray, do not make them of consequence enough to despise them."

"But what, madam, can I have done to Lady Renkin, and Lady Belmont," said Rhoda, "that they should say the most disparaging, and the most ill-natured things?"

"I *could* tell you, my dear, what you have done to them," replied Lady Randolf; "but take my advice, and think no more of the matter."

"If it were not for your ladyship, and Lord Randolf," said Rhoda, "I should be in perfect solitude in all this crowd; for nobody seems to regard, or scarcely to know me."

"I will make you known to Lady Harriet Delamaine," said Lady Randolf. "She is good-natured, and not envious; and will, I am sure, be very much obliged to me, for giving her a companion more to her taste, than I know Miss Renkins to be."

Lady Harriet just then sauntered towards them.

"Dear Lady Randolf," said she, "is

that rug never to be done? I do believe it is the very same that you were about last Christmas."

"I plead guilty," said Lady Randolf; "and perhaps if we meet again here next Christmas, you may renew your acquaintance with it. It rescues the drawing-room hours from absolute idleness, and by keeping me stationary, often gives me more conversation than falls to the lot of those who are moving from room to room all morning, and all evening; but I never make it an occupation—it saves my time, and costs me no thought."

"And preserves you from *ennui*," said Lady Harriet, with a tone of languor.

"Not one and twenty, and talk of *ennui!*" said Lady Randolf. "I hope, Miss Strictland, that you don't talk of *ennui* too?"

"Perhaps," said Lady Harriet, "Miss Strictland is so happy as not to be come out yet?"

"I believe that she is not quite pub-

lished in form," replied Lady Randolf; "but I dare recommend her to your ladyship's notice. She is well worthy of being read in manuscript, and I hope will cure you of part of your *ennui.*"

"I should sooner hope for a cure from a young lady quite new to the world, than from any other means," replied Lady Harriet. "It is the want of novelty that is the evil. After treading for three years the same round, with the same companions, the same emulations, the same antipathies, who can escape from *ennui?*"

"I never knew it," said Lady Randolf.

"Oh, but you are married!" returned Lady Harriet; "but what so *ennuyeux*, what so *génant*, as the life of an unmarried woman, who must do every thing at the will of another, and nothing that she likes herself--who must do all for effect, and nothing for amusement?"

Rhoda smiled.

"Pray, my dear," said Lady Randolf

to Rhoda, "do you find it *ennuyeux*, and *gênant*, not to be married?"

"I should suppose it much more *gênant*, to *be* married," replied Rhoda. "I thought that the da s of singleness had been days of freedom."

"I will leave you two young ladies to settle that point," said Lady Randolf. "Lady Harriet, I am sure you will be happy to know Miss Strictland; and Miss Strictland will think herself honoured by your acquaintance."

Lady Harriet received the introduction very graciously, and fell into an easy conversation with Rhoda, which soon put each party into good humour with the other.

Lady Belmont had been an attentive observer of the whole transaction, and seeing it conclude by an introduction of her daughter to Rhoda, she moved gently towards the party at the working frame.

"What beautiful work, Lady Ran-

dolf!" said she. "You are always my admiration. Others waste, or kill time. You make it. I do believe that the product of your *idle* hours exceeds all of what most of us do, when we are busy."

"Perhaps that is," said Lady Randolf, "because I have no idle hours."

"I wish that you would teach me your secret," said Lady Belmont, languidly; "but you see what dawdles we all are just now!—Not a soul, except yourself, has spirit to set themselves about any thing."

Then stooping over the frame, as if to examine the work more narrowly,

"Who is she?" added she, in a low voice, and glancing her eye at Rhoda.

Lady Randolf, with something of an arch smile, turned suddenly to Rhoda, and said,

"Miss Strictland, Lady Belmont begs the honour of being introduced to you."

A cold curtesy on Lady Belmont's

part, and a reserved one on Rhoda's, were all the present attempt to farther acquaintance on either side.

"You quite misunderstand me," said Lady Belmont, continuing her whisper. "I only wanted to know what she was?"

"I thought you would have known that, by conversing with her," said Lady Randolf, with apparent simplicity. "You see that she is very lovely, and I find her very charming. She is niece to Sir William Strictland, and very likely. I think, to turn the heads of half the men who see her; and this is all that I know of her, actual and conjectural."

"Has she any fortune?" asked Lady Belmont.

"I can say nothing on that head," replied Lady Randolf, "for I know nothing; but, if it is not her own fault, I should think that she might have what she pleases."

"Surely you know enough of the world," said Lady Belmont, "to be aware

that men don't marry for love now-a-days. More is to be done by management, than merit; and Mrs. Strictland is a kind of a Machiavel: but I know nothing of these sort of things—and if Harriet is not married, but by my assistance, the poor girl must go unmarried to her grave. Harriet, my dear, do look at the flower in your hair; it makes you an absolute fright—pray alter it."

Lady Harriet, with an air of dissatisfaction, just raised her eye to a glass—touched the flower, without amending its position, and resuming her conversation with Rhoda,

"Now that is one of the torments of being unmarried. Mamma never thinks that I look well enough. If I were married, she would not care how I looked. Pray does Mrs. Strictland care about such things?"

"Do you not care whether you are well or ill dressed?" said Rhoda.

"Oh yes, I care, but I hate trouble; and after all it comes to the same thing.

There is more luck than skill in such matters, whatever mamma may think: I am sure I have known the worst-dressed girls of my acquaintance married sooner than those, whose mammas, like mine, are always making a fuss about placing a flower half a hair's breadth on this side or that."

"But is the hope of being married to be the *primum mobile* of all we do, say, or think?" said Rhoda.

"I believe so," replied Lady Harriet; "for I hear of nothing else from morning till night, and that makes me wish to be married, to get rid of the subject."

"An admirable method!" said Rhoda, laughing.

"My dear Miss Strictland, how I do envy your spirits," said Lady Harriet. "You can make a joke of things that are very serious evils to me; but I think it a real misfortune to wish to be married as I do, and yet not care one pin for any man upon earth. Now there is Sir James Osbourne;—if he were to ask me,

I should have him, though I do assure you he interests me so little, that I cannot tell you whether he has one eye or two."

"I can tell you *that*," said Rhoda. "He has two eyes; but if you have any designs upon him, I am sorry to tell you, that they were more directed through the whole dinner, to the good things upon the table, than to the pretty ones around it."

"Oh yes, I know that he has no soul; but he has fifteen thousand pounds a year, and the most beautiful jewels that ever were seen," replied Lady Harriet; "but his indifference is not half so provoking as Lord William's criticism, and it is so variable, and mamma thinks it so important, that whenever we are in the house with him, I am tortured twenty different ways in a day, from hints that he lets drop; and I really believe, only to teaze her—not that she hopes any thing from him, for he is no marrying [illegible] use he can give *ton* to any

body that he pleases; and I dare say that there is not one young man of fashion who durst marry any woman, let him be ever so much in love with her, if Lord William was to quiz her—except indeed she had a prodigious fortune, and that would make his apology with every body."

"Bless me!" thought Rhoda, "what a new world am I in!"



CHAP. II.

"Manners themselves are mischievous in him."

Dryden.

NOR had she less reason for the same reflection, when, a few minutes afterwards, she found herself, at the same instant, assailed by Mrs. Strictland on the one hand, and by Lord Randolf on the other; each eager to introduce to her their respective companion. Lord Randolf, however, gave way, with due deference, to the lady.

"My dear," said Mrs. Strictland, "Sir James Osbourne desires to be introduced to you. You will find her, Sir James, simple nature. Miss Strictland is quite new to the world."

Sir James gazed, and bowed; said that he should be honoured by Miss Strictland's acquaintance—and yielded his place to the more animated Lord William St. Quintin.

"Miss Strictland," said Lord Randolf, "if you would not have Lord William St. Quintin cut my throat, you must allow him the honour of being numbered amongst your friends."

Rhoda curtsied, and blushed.

"Is it presumption," said Lord William, "if I aspire to Miss Strictland's friendship, from a motive something more flattering to my personal vanity, than her care for your lordship's safety?"

"I can assure you, my lord," said Rhoda, "that your lordship cannot have a more *secure* one."

Lord Randolf gratefully bowed.

"Oh the privileges of matrimony!" said Lord William. "Randolf, I am compelled now *doubly* to envy you;

but I hope you do not reserve all your favours for married men?" added he, turning to Rhoda.

"My favours," returned Rhoda, smiling, "wait on merit, wherever it is to be found."

"I intreat you, then, to find it *here*," said Lord William, laying his hand on his heart; "for I really cannot live without your favour."

"Nor *on* it, I am sure," said Rhoda.

"Try me—try me," said Lord William. "I am a more reasonable man than you seem to think."

"Shew it now, then, my lord," said Rhoda, "by your attention. Miss Louisa Renkin is going to play on the harp."

"Do you play?" said Lord William.

"Oh no," replied Rhoda.

"Thank God!" replied Lord William.

"My lord!" said Rhoda, starting, "don't you love music?"

"Yes, but not lady performers—not the harp."

"But I am told that Miss Louisa plays incomparably," said Rhoda.

"*Passablement,*" returned Lord William; "but so does Miss Caroline that——and Lady Frances the other.—One is quite wearied with the universality of talents. I earnestly hope that you do not know a note of music?"

"I certainly do not," replied Rhoda.

"Again I say, thank God!—But I am terribly afraid that you draw, or paint, or are 'uncommonly ingenious?'"

"Nothing of the sort, I do assure you," said Rhoda. "I have not a single talent—not a single accomplishment."

"You are irresistible!" said Lord William.

"Are negatives so very potent with your lordship?" said Rhoda.

"Provided they are accompanied by certain affirmatives," replied Lord William;—"such as, for instance—but I

will not give you my criterion—you must at least have learned to know yourself."

"I doubt *that* is the thing which I least know," returned Rhoda.

"Then take me for your instructor. I assure you, that I can look quite through the deeds of men, and women also. There is not a shade in your character that shall escape my notice."

"My little friend," said Lady Morris, gently tapping Rhoda's neck, as she stood behind her, "have some mercy on Lord William. Look him dead, if you please, but let him have the pleasure of hearing Miss Louisa."

"There, my lord," said Rhoda, in a whisper, "I knew that we should be chidden."

"If it may but be *we*," returned Lord William, in the same tone, "I care not in what circumstance."

"Is not that charming—delightful?" said Lady Morris.

"I beg your pardon—but upon my

word, I did not hear it," said Lord William.

"Your lordship astonishes me. I thought that you had been remarkably fond of the harp."

"I may have been. I dare say I have been, as your ladyship thinks so; but really I have forgotten it."

"Well, now, this is so provoking!" said Lady Morris, turning away, and joining Mrs. Strictland. "Could you believe it? Lord William affects not to like the harp.—Such raptures as I have heard him express—and then such pains as I have taken to have a good harp, when he was to be here! I am sure it is quite impossible to know what will please him two days together."

"I really wish," said Mrs. Strictland, "that he would not so engross Rhoda. His approbation might be of use; but his monopolizing her, when nothing can come of it, is really intolerable. Sir James Osbourne has been longing to say



a word to her this half hour, and has never been able to catch one moment."

"He finds Lady Harriet more accessible, I suppose," said Lady Morris, dryly; "for they seem to be in earnest conversation."

"Earnest conversation, my dear friend!" replied Mrs. Strictland. "What, with that milk and water thing!—No, it is impossible that a man of Sir James Osbourne's sense can find any pleasure in Lady Harriet's conversation."

"Lady Harriet is very pretty," said Lady Morris.

"So she has been these three years, and you see with what effect."

"With almost as much as poor Louisa continues to play," said, Lady Morris. "I never was so much out in my politics before. I protest that there is not a soul who listens to her, except Lord and Lady Randolf, and I must say, that they always play a good audience; yet they are little better than nobody—and

Lady Renkin is in agonies. I really must go to her relief, and put an end to so *triste* an exhibition."

Lady Morris, then crossing the room, overwhelmed Miss Louisa with a profusion of compliments, and raptures, which she assured her were pouring from every mouth at her performance. She intreated for one other little air, and then promised that she should be released from the instrument, and returned to the company on whom she had conferred such infinite obligations.

The only agreeable part of this speech to Miss Louisa, was the promise that she should be released from the instrument, she having taken a much truer estimate of the pleasure that she had given, and the obligation which she had conferred, than the good breeding of Lady Morris desired that she should have done.

The "one other little air" having been given,

"Now, my dear Miss Louisa," said

Lady Morris, "we owe *you* some amusement. Francois and his violin are always to be had, and our party is now large enough to enable us to make up a little dance. Pray make your party; you ought to be queen of the night—and let us adjourn into the next room."

The little bustle that this arrangement occasioned, informed Lord William and Rhoda of what was going forward.

"You dance, I hope?" said Lord William.

"Oh yes," replied Rhoda, "when I have an opportunity, unweariedly."

"Admirable!" said Lord William. "Now I hate, more than ever, affectation and languor. May I hope that you will dance with me?"

"With great pleasure," said Rhoda; and she had scarcely said it, before Mrs. Strictland coming up to her, followed by Sir James Osbourne, said,

"Miss Strictland, Sir James Osbourne begs the honour of dancing with you."

"The fair prize is mine," said Lord

William, "and thus I bear it away," added he; and taking Rhoda's hand, led her towards the dancers.

"You, my lord!" said Mrs. Strictland. "You dance!—Dance vulgar English country dances!—How did I hear your lordship exclaim against such exertions, only the very last time that I had the honour of meeting you!"

Even Lord William's effrontery scarcely stood against such a proof of "the affectation and languor" thus brought home to him; and the arch smile, which played round Rhoda's lips, served but the more to disconcert him.

"My dear Miss Strictland," said he, "I must not tell *you* how the desperate attack made upon me, by your admirable cousin, in behalf of a *protegée* of her's, compelled me to take shelter in weakness. You shall yourself judge whether I do not love dancing."

"Oh, my lord," replied Rhoda, "I dare say, your love for dancing is like

your love for the harp;—it comes and goes."

"According to who plays, or dances, you mean, I hope?" said Lord William.

"Oh no—according to the whim of the moment," said Rhoda.

"The taste is always the same," replied Lord William; "the object only changes. If there were any one thing worth loving always, I should be the most constant of creatures."

"Lord William is quite inexplicable, to-night," said Mrs. Strictland to Lady Morris. "He seems determined to thwart all my wishes."

"And mine too," repeated Lady Morris. "I really proposed the little dance on purpose to mortify him, because he would not listen to the harp, and because I know that he hates dancing; and now see with what spirit—with what grace he moves!—as if the whole purpose of his existence was

dancing. Upon my word, your little rustic can do wonders."

"There," said Mrs. Strictland, not hearing, or not regarding Lady Morris's philippic. "There—Sir James Osbourne is actually dancing with Lady Harriet!—It was sure to be so, when he could not dance with Rhoda, which I know that he would have preferred; for I told him that she was not one of the young ladies who would dance him to death, and I am sure Lady Harriet will."

"Then there will be an end of all contentions for the honour of subduing the invincible Sir James," said Lady Morris.

"I am not one of the contenders for Sir James," replied Mrs. Strictland. "I have no daughters, you know. I spoke only for his own sake, as the thing which, I am sure, he would have liked best."

"You waltz?" said Lord William to Rhoda, as he led her to her seat.

"No," said Rhoda, with some feeling

of mortification; "that is one of my negative imperfections."

"Pardon me—I am sure you waltz," replied Lord William. "I see it in every movement—I see it in every look. The mere mechanical part of waltzing you may have yet to perfect yourself in; but the soul of waltzing is within, take my word for it. Do I not tell you that I know you better than yourself?"

"I wish you did in this case," said Rhoda; "for I should like to waltz."

"With you," replied Lord William, "to will is to do. If you will only take the trouble to observe Lady Harriet and myself, for five minutes, you will see in her all that is to be done—in her all that is to be avoided, and you will yourself be perfect."

"Lady Harriet waltzes well?" said Rhoda.

"Admirably!" replied Lord William, "as far as rule can go;—but the soul is wanting."

"I should like extremely to see Lady Harriet waltz," said Rhoda.

"That you shall do in a moment," said Lord William. "Lady Harriet is graciousness itself."

The proof was instantaneous; for he had scarcely uttered the words before Rhoda saw a little party of waltzers, of which Lady Harriet and Lord William were the most distinguished pair, begin a dance, that rivetted upon them the eyes of all the company.

No sooner did Mrs. Strictland observe, that Lord William had deserted his post, than gently moving towards Sir James Osbourne, whom Lady Harriet had also left disengaged, she contrived, with the most undesigning air possible, to draw him towards the place where Rhoda was sitting, and then, with a little management, she accomplished her purpose, of placing him between Rhoda and herself.

"Don't you waltz, Sir James?" said she, with one of her silver tones.

"What, such an old bachelor as I

am, waltz!—Oh no; waltzing made no part of my dancing-master's instructions."

"It would be well, if it made no part of such instructions at the present time," replied Mrs. Strictland. "I am surprized, that Lady Belmont will suffer Lady Harriet to waltz."

"It is a very pretty exhibition," said Sir James.

"Very pretty to see, certainly," replied Mrs. Strictland. "But, I hope you don't think, that all the merit of a young lady can be taken in at the eye. Surely the female sex was designed for domestic life, and ought to be trained to adorn it. Would any man like his wife the better for being able to waltz?"

"I certainly should not like to see my wife waltz," said Sir James; "but I have no objection to seeing the wife of my friend waltz."

"How beautiful!" exclaimed Rhoda; whose whole soul, absorbed in watching Lord William and Lady Harriet, had

not even heard the crafty dialogue which had passed between Mrs. Strictland and Sir James.

Sir James suddenly turned his eye to Rhoda, and met hers, sparkling with delight, and eager pleasure.

"I find I was born too soon," said he, addressing her. "If I had been ten years younger, perhaps I might have had the honour of leading you to join a party, which you would so much have adorned."

"No," said Rhoda, dejectedly, "I don't waltz."

"And I am very glad that you do not," said Mrs. Strictland. "Waltzing is an exhibition, as Sir James has just now called it, that I can never approve."

"Oh, I would not wish to dance in public," said Rhoda; "but in such a private party as this, I should like to waltz."

"We must keep each other in countenance, as well as we can," said Sir James. "I hope I may have the honour of dancing country dances with you?"

Mrs. Strictland heard this request

with a triumph which she could scarcely conceal; a triumph which sprung almost from despair. So powerful a counteraction to all her plans did she consider the indiscreet confession, made by Rhoda, of a wish to waltz, to the very man, who had the moment before declared that he should not like a waltzing wife.

It was, however, this very confession, which had a powerful charm for Sir James. He was so accustomed to the machinations of mothers, and but too often, to the adroit assumption by the daughters of every quality, which could be supposed to be agreeable to the person intended to be attached, that he thought he saw in the undisguised avowal of a wish contrary to his inclination, so unequivocal a proof of the artlessness of Rhoda's character, as gave him nothing to fear from her designs, while it rendered her genuine charms almost irresistible.

Rhoda partook not of Mrs. Strictland's pleasure. Sir James appeared to her, as more suited for her father than for her

husband; he neither dazzled her fancy by his conversation, nor flattered her vanity by his attention. And although Rhoda, alas! loved the trappings of life but too well, she disdained to traffic for them; and thought too highly of her own merit, to believe it necessary to call in art to her assistance.

Rhoda's faults were not the plottings of self-interest, but the indulgence of self-will; rather the children of an ill regulated fancy, than the offspring of design.

Lord William St. Quintin had seized her imagination; and though the intellect of Rhoda was too acute not to perceive through the veil of affected modesty and carelessness, the pretension, and conscious self-importance of his character, yet he did not please her less. Perhaps the foible, which gave her at certain moments the power of shewing her own superiority by mortifying his vanity, was a more acceptable homage to her self-love, than any that he designedly offered her; at least his vanity was a

weapon of defence in her hand, which gave her a confidence in her own strength, and made her feel that she could look down upon one, to whom all the rest of the world looked up; and it disarmed her of what would, in fact, have been the best safe-guard, a salutary fear of his insinuating qualities.

"You see," said Lord William, returning to Rhoda, accompanied by Lady Harriet, "that I told you true; you must be convinced, that you were made for waltzing."

"I hope, my lord," said Mrs. Strictland, "that the purposes of Miss Strictland's existence are much higher. I do assure you, that while I have the honour of protecting her, she will not waltz."

"My dear madam," said Lord William, "how long have you been one of the saints?"

"I may disapprove waltzing, my lord, and yet be no saint," replied Mrs. Strictland. "Nor do I wish to censure others. In a matter of opinion every body has a

right to form a judgment of. I claim only that right."

"Will you allow Miss Strictland the same right?" said Lord William. "Lady Harriet says that she should be delighted to have Miss Strictland for a pupil; and if I may presume to read Miss Strictland's eye, she would not be unwilling to receive Lady Harriet's instructions."

"I believe I may put the matter on that issue," said Mrs. Strictland. "I think I know Miss Strictland's mind perfectly in this particular."

"I should like to waltz of all things," said Rhoda; "but I certainly will not, if you disapprove it."

"Thank you, my love," said Mrs. Strictland, with the most gracious smile. "I knew what your answer would be, as it is always with you. Is not such a disposition," added she, in a half whisper, to Sir James, "worth all the waltzing in the world?"

Sir James thought that it was, for

he saw that the inclination and the resignation were equally genuine.

"We may at least resume sober country dances, I hope," said Lord William, offering his hand to Rhoda.

"I believe—I suppose that I am engaged to Sir James," said Rhoda.

"Is this my reward, for having exposed myself to oblige you?" said Lord William, reproachfully.

"We are not very unwilling to expose ourselves to admiration, I believe," said Rhoda, as she gave her hand to Sir James, expecting to see Lord William give his to Lady Harriet. But Lord William instantly throwing himself on a sofa, said, "Well, you cannot deprive me of the pleasure of watching you."

These words absolutely annihilated Sir James with Rhoda. She knew not that such a person existed; she thought only of Lord William—she danced only for Lord William; and the looks of gay intelligence that passed between them,

while they mortified Sir James, confirmed him more than ever in the opinion that Rhoda took no part in the very apparent designs of Mrs. Strictland; and thus by making success with Rhoda more doubtful, it made it more desirable.

Sir James Osbourne had always *intended some time* to marry, and the more he saw of Rhoda, the more he began to think that there could be no better time than the present. But Sir James knew his own power of choice too well, to be hasty in decision. In fixing on a companion for life, Sir James looked more to the prototype, which may be found in the marriage service, as to the qualities of the wife-like character, than to the false representations of it, that his every day observation brought to his notice. Obedience he held to be indispensable, and he had certainly a pretty strong predilection to being honoured. The ornament of a *meek* and *quiet* spirit was also, in his estimation, a jewel of high price; while the love, which he expected from

his wife, was to be of that extended nature, which must embrace all that he loved and liked, with a preference so decided, as would admit of no rival pleasure to that of obliging him. The impossibility, which he had hitherto proved, of "finding all these graces in one woman, had prevented any one woman from coming into his grace;" and how far it was reasonable in a man, who had so *long* been in pursuit of this Arabian bird, to expect to find it in a girl of eighteen, in the first glare of hope and bloom, it was for Sir James's wisdom to decide. Perhaps had it been left wholly to his wisdom, it would have been decided in the negative. But Sir James had another counsellor, the effects of whose counsels may be seen hereafter.

CHAP. III.

> "Thou hast the tokens of a noble mind;
> But the world wins thee!—
> Thou seekest pleasure in the world around,
> Which in thy own pure bosom should be found."
>
> *Crabbe.*

FROM this evening, Rhoda became the principal star in the constellation of youth and beauty assembled at Overleigh Park. Lord William had pronounced her to be "the most captivating of her sex." He had said to Lord Randolf in the hearing of all the young men, who took their opinions from him,

"It is quite a refreshment to meet with a woman who is not an artist—a performer—one of the literati—where the rich material soil of the human mind has not

been broken up—has not been excoriated by the barbarous arts of education."

"Miss Strictland's charms, however," Lord Randolf had replied, "are not merely in the lustre of her eye, or the glow of her cheeks. He, that takes her for a simpleton, will catch a Tartar."

"A simpleton!" exclaimed Lord William. "What profanation! She is all soul—all intelligence; but it is genuine, unsophisticated intelligence;—not made up, second hand intellect! We trace not the governess, nor the professor, the Royal Institution, nor the reader of lectures, in Miss Strictland's conversation. Thank heaven, she knows nothing of any stars, but those which lighten from her eyes: she has no measure for time, but the pleasure which she gives and receives."

"How long, my lord," said Lord Randolf, "has your lordship been the votary of ignorance? Did I not see you a most ardent adorer of that phenomenon of female literature, by whom our

sex has been so astonished and humiliated?"

"Oh, name her not! The most sickening of the whole female creation! Admire her! Yes, as we admire a comet—something to talk of, and to wonder at; whose malign influence we deprecate, and from whom we look for no good."

Lord Randolf laughed; but the tone was given.—Miss Renkin's harp—and Lady Harriet's pencil—the modelling of one young lady, and the learning of another—mathematics, poetry, chemistry, and astronomy, all sunk to nothing in the presence of the native, unassisted talents of Rhoda. Every word that she uttered became a *bon mot;* every observation that she made, bore the decision of an oracle; and Mrs. Strictland beheld "her little rustic" the arbitress of the modes and fashions of Overleigh Park.

But however her vanity might be gratified, by such unexpected success in her *protegée,* she saw with dismay, the little prospect there was that *such* tri-

umphs would lead to that event, the accomplishment of which, could alone give them any value in her eyes.

While every one complimented her on the "*esprit*"—" the talents"—" the adroitness" of Rhoda, Mrs. Strictland was inclined to think her the most stupid and perverse of creatures; one, who either would not, or could not see her own interest; and one, upon whom all her own erudite policy, and knowledge in the ways of the world, were thrown away. Rhoda was complimented, and extolled through the day, 'till she was almost weary of flattery and praise; yet, was she every night obliged to undergo a lecture from Mrs. Strictland, on her "stupidity"—her "*mal addresse*"—her " disregard of consequences"—" the hopelessness of doing any thing for those, who would do nothing for themselves," with many other variations on the same tune, that could never have occurred to any one of less genius in such matters, than Mrs. Strictland.

Rhoda heard all with gentleness, or rather with such profound contempt, as precluded any other feeling. She was thus preserved from the act of offending; but could lay no claim to the merit of patience.

Delighted to charm, she had in view no particular purpose in doing so. The days passed in such a constant succession of amusements, over which she presided, and in the exercise of a power, which she found to be undisputed, that she scarcely ever thought beyond the present moment, and when she did think, it was either of Mr. Ponsonby, and the sober happiness which awaited her at his parsonage, or of some indistinct visions, which would at times float before her eyes, and seem to shew her the possibility, that the omnipotency of her own charms might prove the fallacy of the supposed axiom, "that Lord William St. Quintin was not a marrying man." Of Sir James Osbourne she certainly did not think; while the gay good humour, in

which he saw her beautiful features continually dressed, with the perfect freedom from all design of attracting his attention, which was visible in all that she did, or omitted to do, rendered her the constant subject of his thoughts, and the most dearly cherished object of his hopes. He knew that he had nothing to fear from Lord William's competition as to the point of marriage. His influence he doubted not would end with his visit; and while he did not wonder that the fancy of Rhoda had been dazzled by manners so captivating in themselves, and to her so new, he trusted that when the effects of the first fascination were a little worn off, her good sense would be able to distinguish the tinsel from the gold; and that she would give him the preference, which he was not unconscious that he deserved in the estimation of every well-judging mind, and of every delicate female heart.

Hence, at this time, he rather sought not to offend than to captivate; to fa-

miliarize himself to her imagination as something that was worthy to be beloved, rather than to obtrude himself as a lover. The consequence was, that Rhoda was scarcely conscious of his existence; and that Mrs. Strictland, who penetrated nearly the truth of the matter, was pushed to the very extremity of her patience, by seeing Rhoda thus refuse to gather the ripened fruit, which hung so temptingly within her reach.

From better feelings, Lord and Lady Randolf saw, with pain, the influence that Lord William St. Quintin had gained over the mind of Rhoda; and they made use of that which they possessed, to counteract the evil which they feared.

"Did I not tell you," said Lord Randolf to Rhoda, "that Lord William was irresistible; and notwithstanding all your prejudices against him, it seems that you find him so."

"Indeed your lordship was never more mistaken," replied Rhoda. "Lord William is no such conquering hero

with me. I think him the vainest, and most affected of creatures, but he amuses me, and I own I am not insensible to the pleasure of seeing one, whom every body else fears. stand in awe of me. I tell him of his faults—I rally him upon his foibles—I can make him colour and stammer, and say and unsay the same thing a dozen times in half an hour.—He fell in love with me, you know, for my ignorance; and I am about to learn Greek, that I may make him adore my learning."

"Ah, my dear Miss Strictland," said Lord Randolf, "take care what you are about; you know not the foe that you have to deal with. And why should Lord William be of so much importance to you?"

"Ask rather, my lord," replied Rhoda, "why I should be of so much importance to Lord William, for that is really the state of the case. While he is the slave of my will, he has not any influence over me, even in the merest trifles.

You know he teazes me day after day, to waltz; but I will not, though I long to waltz, and have no doubt but that I could acquit myself tolerably."

"Mrs. Strictland particularly objects to your waltzing, does she not?" said Lady Randolf.

"Yes, but I dare say that I could soon induce Mrs. Strictland to withdraw her objections," replied Rhoda; "and I would do so, but that I will not give Lord William reason to say of me, as he does of Lady Harriet, that he can make me do any thing he pleases."

"I wish, my dear," said Lady Randolf, "that you would not make Lord William's sayings a motive for your actions. Were I you, I would either waltz, or let it alone, as my own judgment directed, without thinking of what Lord William thinks or says."

"Do you waltz?" said Rhoda.

"No," replied Lady Randolf.

"But do you think it wrong," asked Rhoda.

"Do you make that a question?" said Lady Randolf.

"Why—yes—because there are such different opinions, and I would not do any thing wrong."

"Then do nothing that admits of two opinions," said Lady Randolf.

"Has not Lady Randolf given you a better rule of conduct," said Lord Randolf, "than any you can draw from the versatile tastes of Lord William?"

"Lady Randolf never gives me any thing, but what is good," replied Rhoda. "But, pray now, don't fancy that I think Lord William's 'praise, is fame.'—I laugh at all his ton-giving pretensions—but, his good breeding, his good temper his store of anecdotes, and his comical fancies, make him a very excellent companion."

"Good breeding," said Lady Randolf, "which never sacrifices an atom of personal taste, or personal convenience;—good temper, which delights in humbling even the humble—a store of anecdotes which

perpetuates what the subjects of it would wish to be forgotten—and comical fancies, which turn into ridicule every thing that is sober and good! Are these the qualities, my dear Miss Strictland, that make with you an excellent companion?"

"Oh, I am ashamed!" said Rhoda; "and yet I must confess that I like Lord William's society extremely. Pray how can this be?"

"May I whisper you?" said Lady Randolf. "Lord William is not the only person who is vain."

"Oh, too true," replied Rhoda. "And I really believe that I am vain, because I am idle. What a strange life I lead here! It seems to me that the last fortnight is a perfect blank. How can you contrive to do so much in every way, amidst this eternal succession of nothings, that fill up the time of every body but yourself?"

"In the first place," said Lady Randolf, smiling, "I never play with dogs."

"And I hate them," said Rhoda, throwing from her knee a little curly-haired favourite of Lady Belmont, which she had been caressing for the last half hour, with the greatest fondness. "They spoil one's gowns, dirty one's gloves, and steal away one's time; and yet from mere inanity of mind, I have been fondling this little ugly thing, as if it had been your sweet little Matilda. I really wonder what it is, that I find in myself to be vain of."

Lord and Lady Randolf both laughed.

"My dear Miss Strictland," said Lord Randolf, "if you would but be all that you *can* be, I do not say that you would have reason to be vain; but I fear that you would make all who love you so."

"Should I make *you* vain, my lord?" said Rhoda, with one of the sweetest of smiles.

"Do not ever make me ashamed of you," said Lord Randolf fervently, "and we will leave the question of vanity to be settled hereafter."

These words struck a damp to the heart of Rhoda; they seemed as if they were prophetic. "Oh! my lord," said she, tears starting to her eyes, "how you terrify me! Do I really stand upon the edge of such a precipice?"

"Youth ever stands upon such a precipice," returned Lord Randolf; "lovely, admired, flattered, unsuspecting female youth more particularly so. Look well to your steps; remember that you are more in Lord William's power, than he is in yours. Think not that you are safe, because you do no more than others do. Companionship is not safety; it is not even concealment. We shall be known, as we shall be judged by an individual rule."

"Thank you, my lord," said Rhoda. "I will treasure up your precepts *here*," said she, laying her hand on her heart; "and may they make me wiser!"

At least they made her more thoughtful, for Lord and Lady Randolf just then leaving her, she fell into a reverie so

profound, that she perceived not the gentle steps of Lord William St. Quintin, 'till she found him seated by her side.

"What is worthy of so deep a consideration from her, whose slightest notice is an enviable distinction?" said Lord William, in a voice that always sounded in the ears of Rhoda peculiarly sweet.

"I was thinking of one," said Rhoda, "whom I wish more than any other person I know, to resemble."

"A female, I hope," said Lord William.

"Yes, *indeed* a female!" replied Rhoda. "I should find no such prototype in the other sex. I would rather be Lady Randolf than any other creature in the world."

"Oh, no, you would not," said Lord William.

"Why?" said Rhoda.

"Because if you were, I should not like you so well."

"That," said Rhoda, "might, perhaps, rather impeach your lordship's taste, than the merit of my model of perfection."

"Oh, as to perfection," returned Lord William, "there is nothing so revolting as perfection. Lady Randolf is all perfection—the best wife—the best mother—the best good woman; but around all these superlatives, there is thrown so chilling an atmosphere, that my teeth chatter in my head, whenever I approach her ladyship. She makes me think of the blessed island, of which we read in the tales of the fairies, where all the wonders of nature and art are collected, yet are for ever veiled from the eye of the profane by a thick fog."

"But only from the profane?" said Rhoda, with a look that could not be misunderstood.

"Oh, gently," said Lord William; "do not thus school me with your eye; you know that I am sensible to your slightest censure."

"More sensible than corrigible, perhaps," said Rhoda, laughing. "But don't you think, my lord, that there is one lesson which both you and I might

learn with advantage from Lady Randolf? With all her merit, she is perfectly free from vanity."

"Then she wants a sense," replied Lord William. "I would as soon be without a musical ear, as without vanity."

"My lord!" said Rhoda.

"Oh, I am not afraid to meet you on this ground," replied Lord William. "Vanity is the parent of benevolence. When we are pleased with ourselves, we are in good humour with others—when we are always brooding over our faults, we look sharp for still greater in our neighbours, to keep ours in countenance. The vainest people are always the most candid, take my word for it."

"And you are example, my lord," said Rhoda.

"With all my heart," replied Lord William; "for I do assure you, there is no quality which I possess, of which I am more vain than my vanity."

"But it is so *common* a quality," replied Rhoda, "I think we high-souled

beings should disdain to have any thing to do with it."

"And wrap ourselves up instead, I presume, in that morose, unsocial quality pride. Oh, no, my dear Miss Strictland, let us leave pride to the *perfect*, to the dull, silent, conscious perfect. But let us, who aspire not after perfection, never part from sprightly, prattling, good humoured vanity; it is the best companion to ourselves, and makes us so, to all with whom we have to do."

"But as I *do* aspire after perfection," returned Rhoda; "and as I believe that neither pride nor vanity make any part of it, you must give me leave to form myself on the example of Lady Randolf, who is as free from one as the other; and who is, in my eyes, so excellent, and so charming, that I assure you, I think Lord Randolf the man in the world, the most to be envied."

"He is not the object of my envy," said Lord William. "*One* only man *can* be so."

"And who is this extraordinary creature?" asked Rhoda.

"I flatter myself that he does not exist," returned Lord William: "I hope that he never will exist."

"It is indeed true," said Rhoda to herself, "that Lord William is not a marrying man."

CHAP. IV.

> "Turn thee, fair creature, from a world of sin,
> And seek the jewel happiness within."
>
> *Crabbe.*

The crowd of guests, which had kept the house at Overleigh Park overflowingly full, from the drawing-room to the garret, for the last fortnight, had been composed of such a varying succession of individuals, that frequently, of the eighteen or twenty who had appeared at breakfast, not more than nine or ten were to be seen at dinner. Their places, however, were generally more than supplied by new personages, who in their turn gave way to a new group; and the current seemed to flow on, with an equally full stream, and without any symptoms of being exhausted.

The few, that remained stationary,

consisted of Lady Belmont, and her daughter, Sir James Osborne, Lord and Lady Randolf, Mr. and Mrs. Strictland, Rhoda, and Lord William St. Quintin.

Rhoda heard from every body of Lord William's lengthened stay, as of a phenomenon more extraordinary than any thing which had before appeared in the natural or political world.

"I am confident," said Lady Morris, "that I should as soon have expected the Prince Regent to have done me the honour of remaining at Overleigh Park for a fortnight together, as that Lord William should have done so. I never had so much reason to be flattered in my life. He is quite an altered man. He seems to be pleased with every thing, and every body; and I heard him tell Sir Frampton the other day, that we had the best cook in Europe."

"Yet, I suspect," said Lady Belmont, with a sarcastic tone, "that it is not the attractions of the table which detain Lord William so long amongst us. Well, I

do wonder that young people will suffer him to talk to them so much, when they know so well that he means nothing. Harriet, I applaud you for not letting him look at your painting the other morning. He knows nothing of pictures."

"I am sure he used to talk of nothing else, once; but now he never looks at them."

"I wish he did look at them," said Mrs. Strictland, "rather than at what he does look. Indeed, Lady Morris, we must vote him a nuisance;—he is a perfect dog in the manger."

"I do not perceive," said Lady Morris, dryly, "that he is in any body's way."

"Oh no, not in the least," said Lady Belmont; "he leaves the field open in every quarter but one, and though we cannot but wonder that it is so, nobody seems inclined to dispute it with him there."

"Lord William," said Lady Randolf, "is too well understood to be formidable to any body; and if he seems to have no competitors, where so many would wish to contend with him, I apprehend that it is not the dread of Lord William's superiority, but a sense of the lady's, that keeps modest men at a distance."

Rhoda bowed gratefully to Lady Randolf, and felt herself enthroned equally by the malice of Lady Belmont, and the good nature of Lady Randolf.

"But when will this immeasurable visit end?" said Mrs. Strictland. "Have you the least notion, Lady Morris?"

"No, indeed," returned that lady; "nor do I wish to have a notion. Lord William gives a charm to every society that he enters."

"Pray," said Lady Randolf, "don't let us pay ourselves so bad a compliment as to wonder that we should be able to keep Lord William amongst us so long. The obligation seems to me, to be all on

his side. I know I shall pity him, when he leaves us."

"Well, that's very obliging, indeed," said Lady Morris. "Yet, every body *does* know, and one is really obliged to confess, that the company of Lord William St. Quintin confers an honour, which it is not in the power of any one else to bestow."

"And who has invested him with the power of conferring honour?" said Lady Randolf. "He owes it certainly to nothing personal. I allow Lord William the merit of being a man of fashion—a man of rank—a man of polished manners: but are there not many such?—And what is there, in his talents and acquirements, that can entitle him to the dictatorship in the commonwealth of good society—or make those who defy

> "The bar, the pulpit, and the throne,
> St. Quintin's law with much submission own?"

Take my word for it, Lord William

could not be a wolf, if we were not sheep."

Rhoda, who well knew for whose sake Lady Randolf was so unusually eloquent, felt at once mortified and flattered—mortified, that Lady Randolf should think it thus necessary to expose to her the weakness of a foe, whom she had affected to despise; and flattered by a consciousness, that notwithstanding the truth of all which Lady Randolf had said, Lord William did, in fact, hold the dictatorship, and that she was herself,

"Cæsar's Cæsar!"

She was too dignified, however, to take any part in a conversation, in which she disdained to acknowledge that she had any personal interest. She maintained, therefore, an unbroken silence, and appeared to be wholly engaged in arranging some flowers in a glass, which stood on the table before her.

"People who mix little in the world," said Lady Belmont, with her usual po-

lished insolence, and looking at Lady Randolf, "may affect to despise the power that Lord William has usurped there; for I am ready to own that it is an usurpation: but he has with him the voice of the multitude—and *vox populi, vox Dei*, as my lord says. For my own part, I would rather submit to any tyranny, than encounter the horrors of a revolution; and what a tremendous one it must be, if we were to put down our present rulers, and establish good sense, good taste, and sound morality in their place!"

"And so," said Lady Randolf, as she arose to leave the room, "the 'Statutes of Omri' continue to be kept, and will be to the end of time."

In the evening of the same day, when in an interval of dancing, Lord William was seated as usual by the side of Rhoda,

"Are there any commands," said he, "that I can be happy enough to execute for you in town? It will be the greatest

of obligations to give me something to do for her, who will be the only object of my thoughts."

"Are you then going to leave us?" said Rhoda, with a feeling of disappointment, that she scarcely understood.

"Us!" repeated Lord William. "I do assure you, that I shall leave but a single individual at Overleigh; and if I could stay without outraging all decorum—all the rules of *bienseance*, you would not so soon get rid of me."

"Oh," said Rhoda, with her usual frankness, "you need not be afraid of *that*:—Lady Morris thinks herself as much honoured by your continuing in her house, as if you were the Prince Regent himself."

"Oh, I dare say;—but neither Lady Morris, nor Sir Frampton's 'best cook in Europe,' could have kept me here a fortnight, I can tell them; and I really begin to make a conscience of drinking their wine, and eating their *ragouts*, for such a length of time, despising them

so heartily as I do all the while—and yet to go—and to go unregretted;—if such *is* to be my fate!" said he, earnestly looking at Rhoda.

Rhoda blushed, and vexed to feel that she did so, and piqued also with the hope that Lord William's scrutinizing eye betrayed, replied,

"I really cannot flatter you, my lord, that it will not be so. You were very near being voted a nuisance this morning, in full assembly."

"Without one dissenting voice?" said Lord William.

"Oh no, Lady Morris put her veto on the question, and it was lost."

"And only Lady Morris?"

"*Only* Lady Morris. Lady Belmont, indeed, said a few words in your favour, but she did not vote."

"And was not the 'still small voice' of friendship raised in my defence?" said Lord William.

"Where could you expect to find a

friend?" said Rhoda. "Amongst those whom you despise, or those you flatter?"

"I should expect to find one in her I love," said Lord William.

"Oh, there was no one of that description in company," said Rhoda, rising, and going from Lord William; for at that instant she recollected there was such a person in the world as Mr. Ponsonby.

Sir James Osbourne met her as she crossed the room, and she accepted with joy his offered hand to lead her into the dance, in the movement of which she endeavoured to lose the remembrance of that disturbance which Lord William's last words had occasioned.

Lord William, who with all his apparent carelessness, did nothing without design, imputed art equally to Rhoda. In her favours, and in her sarcasms, he saw only coquetry—but Rhoda was not a coquette. Alive to the power of charming, and not unwilling that her power

should be felt, there were moments when, in the gratification of self, she was not always sufficiently mindful of the feelings of others; but she was incapable of intentionally giving pain for an instant, and she would have disdained to have encouraged a hope, which she did not design to fulfil. It was the impulse, arising from this very disdain, that carried her away so abruptly from a conversation, in which she took but too lively an interest; for fully aware, as she thought herself, that Lord William only meant to soothe his own vanity, by flattering her's, yet self-love sometimes suggested that his words might have a more serious meaning, and that the heart, hitherto so invulnerable, had not been able to resist her powers of charming. She had never yet asked herself, if the case were so, what effect it would have upon her intentions in favour of Mr. Ponsonby, or her prospects in life; but it is certain, that the possibility of having secured such a conquest, never

presented itself to her imagination, but that her heart beat with a tumult, the nature of which she did not understand, and her thoughts became bewildered, without the power of reducing them to order.

The effervescence of her spirits gave a manner and life to her dancing, which more than ever convinced Lord William that she meant to shew him of how little importance he was to her. But he was too well read in the wiles of the female heart, to be discouraged by so shallow an artifice, had it been designed; and the suspicion of such an intention on the part of Rhoda, had no other effect on Lord William, than to give a shade of revenge to what was commonly nothing more than the simple gratification of vanity.

"This little rustic," thought he, "shall not be initiated into our world of fashion for nothing; the honour, like all honours, must be paid for."

Lord William, who had never with-

drawn his eye from Rhoda, while the dancing continued, joined her the moment that it was over.

"You are resolved," said he, "to make the duty of departure as severe as possible. Was it to a desire of pleasing Sir James, that we owe the animation and grace which has made you the only point of attraction amidst all the figurantes?—Or were you resolved to make such an impression on my mind, as would make me insensible to the charms of every other female who may cross my path before we meet again? Pray acknowledge the last motive—for in that there will be kindness."

"I fear," said Rhoda, "that the music, the lights, the gay faces around me, and the spirits of eighteen must be answerable for all my exceedings. I meant neither to pain nor please any body but myself."

"Are you then so indifferent to your sex's privileges?—Do you not,

indeed, wish to give either pain or pleasure?"

"I would please all the world, if I could," replied Rhoda, ardently.

"Half your wish is yours already," replied Lord William; "and with that I am afraid you must be satisfied: but if you would know the real charm of pleasing, change your world for an individual."

"It will be time enough to think of that change ten years hence," replied Rhoda: "at present my ambition takes a wider range."

"So much for natural coquetry!" thought Lord William, while he followed Rhoda with his eye, as she again joined the dancers. Yet Rhoda meant not to attack, but to defend. Her palpitating heart gave a consequence to Lord William's words that alarmed her. She thought of Byrhley—of the Wyburgs—of Mr. Ponsonby; and until she could determine what influence they should have over

her destiny, she did not dare to listen to Lord William—for her vanity had already persuaded her, that it was but to listen, and to have all which that vanity had suggested as *possible.*

"But why does he go away?" said she to herself; and she resolved to be more than ever upon her guard. "It shall not be found," thought she, "that I am more in Lord William's power than he is in mine."

Under this impression, she allowed herself to be so much occupied by others, that Lord William could not again find an opportunity of speaking to her, until the company were going to separate for the night. She was a little withdrawn from her companions, looking over some pamphlets, one of which she designed to take into her own room.—Lord William approached her with an air so unusually grave, that she half started.

"I have taught you an evil lesson against myself," said he. "I am the first victim to your experiment in the

pleasure of tormenting. We part to-morrow, and you will not gratify my self-love even with a serious look."

"If we were to part to meet no more," returned Rhoda, "I really believe that I could afford your lordship a tear; but when in a few short weeks we are to inhabit the same metropolis, and to frequent the same society, it would be foolish to sadden to-day, by thinking of to-morrow."

"How well we can reason, when we do not feel," said Lord William. "Have you no apprehension what 'a few short weeks' may produce, destructive of happiness for ever?"

"No," replied Rhoda, laughing. "I really cannot say that I have. I think I can foresee all that will happen to either of us, in these few formidable weeks. Your lordship will divide your time between the duties of a patriot, and those of a citizen. You will astound the senate with your eloquence, in the hours of business; and you will teach

young ladies to think better of themselves than they ought to think, in your hours of pleasure;—while I shall go on in one uniform course of living, which will serve for no other purpose, than to prove how easily we could have dispensed with those prime gifts of nature—a head, and a heart."

"Oh, may you be ignorant, until we meet again, that you possess the one," said Lord William; "and then I will trust to the other, to direct its companion to its own happiness."

"Good night, my lord," said Rhoda.

"Will you not shake hands with me?" said Lord William. "Pray let us not part like strangers, lest we should meet strangers too."

Rhoda gave him her hand, which he gently pressed between his, and with a sigh, that soft as it was, was not lost on Rhoda's ear—

They separated.——

Rhoda had omitted,, according to her usual custom, to write to Frances for se-

veral posts together. She could scarcely tell why she had done so. There seemed to be something at issue, which she wished should be determined before she wrote. She had, however, decidedly destined this evening to the employment; but she found it more beyond her power than ever.

The visions of rank, of splendour, of triumph, so danced before her eyes, that she could see—she could think of nothing else. "Lord William could hardly explain himself more explicitly," thought she; "and yet, *if there are* plainer words, why did he not use them? He is his own master. Why refer to a future hour a conquest, which no doubt he believes that he could secure now?—And what if he had explained himself fully?—Should I have heard him with pleasure? I have said, that I think him the vainest, the most affected of creatures; and I *do* think him so:—yet his flattery pleases me. Could I believe that I have really touched his heart, I

should feel triumphant; and if he were to offer me his hand"——She stopped. "*If!*" said she. "Ah, the triumph *is* his!—I look towards him with hope!—My sovereignty is not *here!*—I reign only in the heart of Mr. Ponsonby!"

This thought restored Rhoda to her better feelings. She was resolved to despise Lord William—to think of him no more—to take pleasure only in the praises of the wise and the good—to attach herself more than ever to Lady Randolf, and to make her the example of her future life.

CHAP. V

" Abstract what others feel, what others think,
All pleasures sicken, and all glories sink."

Pope.

NOTWITHSTANDING all the good resolutions of the night before, Rhoda no sooner cast her eyes around the breakfast table, without meeting the flattering glance of Lord William, to which she was now so much accustomed, than she felt as if alone in the world. She remained silent and thoughtful; and even regardless of the observations which this change in her usual manners would expose her to.

Her faithful friend, Lord Randolf, was, however, less inattentive to her interests. By a little management he placed himself near her, and without appearing to take

notice of her gravity and chagrin, soon restored her to her usual vivacity.

The malice of Lady Belmont, which was never asleep, would not, notwithstanding, suffer Rhoda to resume herself upon such easy terms.

In a half whisper, which was meant to be overheard by Rhoda, she said to Lady Morris,

"Flattery, I find, is more necessary to the sustenance of some people, than even all your excellent rolls and butter; and how provident is your ladyship, in providing for the tastes of all your guests!"

A civil assenting kind of laugh was the only reply that Lady Morris made; for though she did not chuse to disgust Lady Belmont, she was too much obliged to Rhoda for having procured her the honour of Lord William St. Quintin's appearance at Overleigh Park for more than a fortnight, to be inclined to join in any offence against her.

But Rhoda, whom a consciousness of her own weakness made irritable under the observation of it from another, felt her cheek glow with the crimson of anger, and said with an air of mingled resentment and mortification,

"There, my lord! You see the reward that you have for your good nature."

"I look for no reward," said Lord Randolf, in a low voice, "from these guests; nor for any other from you, but that you will do justice to yourself."

"Oh, my lord," said Rhoda, "you know not to what a severe punishment you assign me!—There is scarcely another human creature, of whom I have so contemptible an opinion, as I have of myself."

"Well, then, confess yourself to Lady Randolf," said Lord Randolf. "I am sure that she will give you absolution at the cost of very easy penance."

"Will Lady Randolf admit me into her school-room this morning?" said Rhoda. "I will be as silent as a mouse,

and as docile as my little favourite, Louisa, during the whole time of lessons, provided that I may be allowed to speak all I wish when they are over."

"I would venture to answer for Lady Randolf," said Lord Randolf, "but that here she comes to answer for herself."

"Upon what occasion, my lord?" said Lady Randolf.

"An addition to your pupils," replied Lord Randolf. "Miss Strictland is desirous to benefit by your counsels. Will you take her under your charge?"

"Most willingly," replied Lady Randolf, "being quite sure that she will do me honour."

"Oh, my dear Lady Randolf," said Rhoda, "I come to you to be cured of my vanity, and you increase the disease."

"I would not begin with caustics," replied Lady Randolf; "but in the end, perhaps, you may have no reason to complain of my lenity. I can put people into penance, and I never give medals of

merit. When is our course of medicine to begin?"

"This very morning, if you please," said Rhoda; "and that I may not be involved in the vortex of morning engagements, which is forming around me, I will slip away, and you shall find me in your dressing room."

So Rhoda wished, and so Rhoda designed; for she had worked herself up to the resolution to confide all her follies, and all her uncertainties to Lady Randolf; confident that she should find in the gentleness of her nature the kindest friend, and in the excellence of her understanding the wisest counsellor.

"When I have once declared to Lady Randolf," thought she, "the terms which I am upon with Mr. Ponsonby, I shall be ashamed to betray any, the slightest gratification in the flatteries of Lord William. She will fortify my good resolutions—she will fix my taste for the real happiness of life, in preference to its

tinsel—she will teach me to respect myself, and to disdain to take my rule of action from the whims of others, rather than from my own feelings.—I cannot do a wiser thing than to open my whole heart to Lady Randolf."

Happy would it have been for Rhoda, had she been as wise in act, as she was in thought. But she was not the only person who considered the departure of Lord William as an epoch in her life.

Mrs. Strictland had borne, with the extremest impatience, the obstacles that his distinctions had thrown in the way of her favourite plan. She had lived in perpetual fear, that the length of his visit would wear out the patience of Sir James Osbourne; and she had called forth all her softest, sweetest attractions to amuse and engage him from day to day. She had seen with much satisfaction, and some hope, that she had not been wholly unsuccessful.

The fact was that Sir James had become, every day, more and more in love

with Rhoda; but having prudently resolved not to draw her attention upon himself, while he was sensible that her fancy was wholly occupied with Lord William, he found some indemnification for the restraint which he had imposed upon his inclinations, by attaching himself to Mrs. Strictland, to whom he could speak for ever of Rhoda, without any fear of becoming wearisome, and from whom he was sure to hear all that he wished to hear of the person whom he one day hoped to call his wife. Not that he gave Mrs. Strictland credit for the truth of what she said, since being fully aware of her designs, he knew that she spoke rather that which she believed he wished to hear, than what she knew to be fact. But Sir James, with all his cautionary prudence, was not superior to the common weakness of easily believing what he hoped; and he satisfied at once his pretension to penetration, and the wishes of his heart, by telling himself that he did not believe what Mrs. Strict-

land said was truth, because she said it, but because every word, every look, every action of Rhoda's, gave evidence to the facts asserted by Mrs. Strictland.

He had beheld the departure of Lord William, with a pleasure, fully equal to that felt by Mrs. Strictland on the occasion; a pleasure which was not less for what had passed between Lord William and Rhoda, the last evening of Lord William's stay at Overleigh Park. He had seen mortification in the eye of Lord William. He had seen Rhoda less disposed to lend herself to his attentions than she had ever been before, and he had heard the reproach that "they were to part on the morrow, and that Rhoda would not afford him one serious look!" He had seen the gay indifference with which this reproach had been received, and he had said to himself,

"The lovely Rhoda is as well judging, as she is beautiful."

He felt that to himself she had been unusually gracious; and he was even

inclined to believe that she had preferred giving him her hand a second time in the dance, to conferring that honour upon Lord William.

Who that has ever been in love, will wonder that Sir James believed all that he wished, and anticipated all that he hoped?

"I have sacrificed sufficiently to prudence," thought Sir James. "I will now give the reins to love—The hour to which I have always looked forward, is come—I will now marry."

Sir James was not aware that by reversing the natural order of love and prudence, he destroyed the powers of each to confer happiness.

Sir James found a most willing, and adroit assistant to the furtherance of his determination in Mrs. Strictland; who co-operated in all his designs, without pushing him to the extremity of explaining them, and even without appearing conscious that he had any.

He imagined himself, therefore, still master of his own secret; and was little

aware how frequently Mrs. Strictland was the first mover of much of what he said and did; nor what a store of words and actions she had laid up in her memory, from whence might be deduced, with very plausible fairness, nearly an explicit declaration of his intentions in favour of Rhoda. The departure of Lord William had been, without any communication between them, the signal to both, to bring forward their machinations into more open day; and it was by the management of Mrs. Strictland, that an excursion for this very morning had been arranged, in which Sir James was to drive Rhoda in his curricle to the neighbouring town, in company with all the gossips, young and old, who at that time formed the society at Overleigh Park.

This arrangement was going forward, at the very moment when Rhoda was making her escape from the possibility of being entangled by any share in it; and as she went out of one door of the

breakfast-room, Mrs. Strictland entered at another to put the finishing stroke to her operations. She caught a glimpse of Rhoda's garments; and like an able general, instead of pursuing a flying enemy, who had got too far the start, she turned round at once, and met her face to face by a shorter cut.

"My dear Rhoda, where are you running away so strangely, just when all the parties are forming for the morning? You never will learn that presence of mind, which turns every little incident in society to advantage; but I endeavour to supply all your deficiencies. Come, we are all going to the next town; it will be extremely amusing, and Sir James Osbourne has desired that I will prevail with you to accompany him in his curricle."

"I hope you will excuse me," said Rhoda. "I really have no taste for shopping, and I do not want a single thing; besides I am engaged."

"To whom?" said Mrs. Strictland, with some alarm. "Surely Colonel——"

"You need not be frightened," replied Rhoda. "There is no Colonel in the case. But I have promised to sit with Lady Randolf this morning, in her dressing-room."

"Is that all?" said Mrs. Strictland, recovering herself: "that may do any day. But indeed, my dear, I am surprised that you should take such delight in Lady Randolf; to me she seems the dullest person in the world. I have met her here repeatedly, and we are not better acquainted now than we were the first day we saw each other. Of one thing I am very sure, that she will never be of any use to you; with her maxims, of 'letting things take their own course'—of 'sitting still and seeing what will come of it,' and such like lazy apophthegms, as if there was any thing worth having, that was to be had without pains."

"I find nothing lazy in the intellect

of Lady Randolf," returned Rhoda; "and she appears to me to have the justest way of thinking of almost any body, whom I know."

"Well, we will leave her to her just way of thinking," replied Mrs. Strictland, "while we make ourselves ready for our drive. I quite long to feel this sweet air, and *exhilarate* in this lovely sun."

"I wish you all the pleasures you anticipate," said Rhoda; "but I know that you will not insist upon my partaking in them."

"I do not understand you," said Mrs. Strictland.—"Insist!—I am sure that is a word which you never heard me use. I should be ashamed of any thing so peremptory; but I thought that I had a right to suggest—perhaps to advise."

"I am always most thankful for your advice and suggestions," replied Rhoda. "But is it not indifferent where I pass my morning?"

"Rhoda, you surprise me," said Mrs. Strictland, with a tone of wounded feel-

ing. "I did not expect, after all the partial affection which I thought I had shewn you, to hear so unkind an insinuation as that any thing which you do, can be indifferent to me. Is not your advancement in every way, the whole business of my thoughts? You will not find a better friend in Lady Randolf."

"Oh! pray, my dear Mrs. Strictland, do not so misunderstand me; do not take matters so wrongly. I must have expressed myself ill, if I have given you ground for such thoughts. I am sure I am incapable of doubting your kindness.—All that I meant to say, was that I thought you would not care where I spent this *one* morning.—You never before——."

"No, my dear, I never before did interfere, for which perhaps I have been wrong. But I do so hate all controuling —all coercion,—and you are so complying, my dear Rhoda. But upon this *one* occasion suffer me to say, that you *must* oblige me, you must *indeed*, if you wish

to obliterate the pain occasioned by the inadvertent word *indifferent.*"

Rhoda felt more reluctant to comply, than the real value of what she gave up could justify; for what could seem more easy than to secure a *tête-à-tête* with Lady Randolf any other morning, or what more inconsequential than whether it should take place one day or another? Yet she would have persisted in her refusal, if she could have found words, which would as well have disguised the harshness of denial, as Mrs. Strictland had done to conceal the tyranny of controul. This was not however Rhoda's talent; she was more apt to speak her meaning unequivocally, than to confound it by circumlocutory words, which while they wound the heart, confound the understanding.

"Since you make such a point of what appears to me a trifle," said Rhoda, "I certainly will do as you wish me. I will only just step, and make Lady Randolf my apology."

"There is really not a moment to be lost," said Mrs. Strictland. "But luckily here comes Lady Randolf. Make your apology, and be off;" and away went Mrs. Strictland.

"My dear Lady Randolf," began Rhoda.

"My dear, no apologies," interrupted Lady Randolf; "I hear what you cannot do, and what you must do. We must all bow to the law of necessity; only promise to indemnify me to-morrow morning."

"Oh, I never was more vexed in my life," said Rhoda; "it is so provoking."

"No, no, not so provoking," said Lady Randolf. "The morning is charming; you will have a delightful drive, and we will make ourselves amends to-morrow."

"In little points, and in great," said Rhoda, "my dear Lady Randolf is always the very thing she ought to be.

When shall I be worthy to sit on the lowest step of her foot-stool?"

"Is not that a little *a-la-mode de* St. Quintin?" said Lady Randolf. "Beware!" holding up her finger—"evil communications——"

"I am so flattered," said Rhoda, fervently.

"No, my dear:—but you are too an enthusiastic admirer of what is both very attainable and very common. In the science of seeing things simply as they are, lies the whole matter."

"And the whole difficulty," replied Rhoda; "but it is a difficulty that requires more wisdom and more virtue to conquer, than you are willing to allow in your own case; for in this world of *composition*, it is scarcely possible for common mortals to distinguish the jewel from the counterfeit."

"Learn to *know* the world," said Lady Randolf, "but do not rail at it. Estimate its good things at their true value,

and they are blessings: to those who either over or under-rate them, only are they snares; and so good bye, my dear, with a morsel of morality to ruminate upon, if Sir James does not furnish more sprightly subjects for your attention."

CHAP. VI.

> "Each fond delusion from her soul to steal;
> Teach her from folly peaceably to part,
> And wean her from a world she loves too well."
>
> *Mason.*

If Rhoda did not find Sir James very sprightly, she found him very obliging, and very assiduous to please, with good sense delivered in good language, without pretensions—without self-confidence—without affectation; and if not amusing himself, ready to be amused; and above all, manifesting a deference to herself so profound, as was more flattering to her self-love, than all the fluent adulation of Lord William. Sir James's homage was, in fact, the very homage which she would have wished to have received from Lord William, and the

want of which had been the counterbalance against his captivating more than her fancy and her senses. Sir James had no influence over either; yet she was not insensible that his distinction would do her honour in the opinion of all around her; nor was she without a secret gratification in establishing such a proof, that the power of her charms was not confined to the *no marrying* Lord William St. Quintin.

The more she listened to Sir James, the less she felt Lady Randolf's wisdom necessary to guard against the fascination of Lord William; and before she had returned to Overleigh Park, she began to think that her morning had been as well spent in Sir James Osbourne's curricle, as in Lady Randolf's dressing room. She felt this the more, because the pleasure, which she derived from Sir James's attentions, in no degree interfered with the actual preference which she entertained for Mr. Ponsonby; nor brought at all in question the fulfilling the engagements

which were tacitly between them. She felt that if Sir James were to offer her his hand on the instant, that her answer was ready and prompt, "that she had neither heart nor hand to bestow;" and thus confident in herself, she listened to her companion with a pleasure so genuine, and replied with a graciousness so frank, as left Sir James scarcely any thing to wish.

On the return of the party from their expedition, Rhoda flew directly to Lady Randolf.

"My dear Lady Randolf," said she, "we really have had a delightful drive. I wish you had been with us; but at least you must look like one of us, and wear what I have brought you."

"And pray, my dear, what does this mean?" said Lady Randolf, taking a bunch of blue ribbons that Rhoda offered her.

"I can scarcely tell," said Rhoda, laughing; "but Colonel Montford found letters at the post-office, informing him

that his brother had gained his election, and so he would make us all buy blue ribbons, to wear in honour of his triumph, and I did not like to have you left out."

"I thank you, my dear," said Lady Randolf; "but I really know nothing of Colonel Montford's brother, and very little of Colonel Montford; and I am not at all inclined to add any thing to a triumph of his."

"I suppose that is not what is meant," said Rhoda; "but when he asked us to wear the ribbons, Mrs. Strictland said it was civil to do so; and I thought that you, perhaps, would be sorry if you had not a favour like the rest of us, as some body or other was buying for all whom we had left at home."

"I do assure you, my dear, that I feel very much obliged to you, for so kindly remembering me," said Lady Randolf; "but to speak frankly, I never do wear the badges of any party; not even of those, which I approve the most. The spirit of discord and contention will

always be mischievous enough, without these subaltern arts to inflame it; and however I may be a favourer, I would not be a partizan of any cause. If truth and reason are ultimately to prevail, it can only be by the majority making truth and reason the only motives for their actions."

"Then there goes my ribbon," said Rhoda, throwing it into the fire. "What a fool I was not to see the matter in this light from the first! Indeed, I had no wish to be so badged. I dislike Colonel Montford heartily; and Sir James said something of the whole being an infamous business; but I thought that I must do as others did. Now promise me, not to think the worse of me for my folly."

"Promise me not to think the worse of me," said Lady Randolf, "for having treated seriously a matter usually thought so indifferent. But as my rule for conduct is not what others do, but what I think right, or at least innocent, I en-

deavour to act up to it in little as well as great occasions; and as you have done me the honour to exalt me into something of a Mentor, I did not think it fair to conceal from you the *principle* upon which I acted; although in any other case I should have been contented, without any explanation, not to have worn the ribbon."

"How very good you are to me!" said Rhoda. "I flatter myself that I already feel the influence of your goodness. Your guardian care was not withdrawn upon all occasions even this foolish morning. All the world were buying French gloves in a back shop, and I was going to follow 'the multitude to do evil,' when I heard Mrs. Strictland say, 'what would Lady Randolf say, if she were here?' and Lady Belmont replied, 'she would say as she did the other day, that she thought the husbands and fathers, who permitted their wives and daughters to traffick in smuggled goods, ought not to prosecute poachers.' And

so, I laid down my French gloves, and returned to open daylight, and the public counter, and contented myself with English manufacture."

"My dear Miss Strictland," said Lady Randolf, "if you would but always act up to the suggestions of your own heart, you would want no other guardian."

"I do think I am wiser to-day than I was yesterday," replied Rhoda; "but when shall I be as wise as you?"

"When you have a husband and children," said Lady Randolf, "that fill up every chink of your thoughts and affections, and leave no room for the flatteries, or the vanities of the world to have place in either."

"But I see only *one* Lord Randolf," said Rhoda.

"*I* think him the *individual*, certainly," replied Lady Randolf. "But there are offers to be found.—What think you of Sir James?"

"Oh, no," returned Rhoda, "Sir James *cannot* be the man."

Here the conversation of the two ladies was interrupted, and they separated.

But while Rhoda had thus laid down a negative, from which she believed that there could be no appeal, Sir James's hopes, that he *should be the man*, grew stronger every moment; and when he saw Rhoda appear in the drawing room without a blue ribbon, while every other female, with the exception of Lady Randolf, wore the badge of the triumph of Colonel Montford's brother, he felt a glow of self-gratifying importance; and turning to Mrs. Strictland, he said,

"How much I admire the good sense, and the good humour of Miss Strictland! I felt confident, notwithstanding the sweetness with which she seemed to yield to the general voice, that when she knew the exact truth of the case, she would not honour so disgraceful a triumph, by wearing its livery. "And I am sure," added he, then first seeing the blue ribbons that were streaming from

Mrs. Strictland's head-dress, "that if you knew how much cause the successful candidate has to be ashamed of his success, you, too, would have left your blue ribbons on your toilette, as I see that Miss Strictland has done her's."

"Did you tell Miss Strictland how the matter was?" said Mrs. Strictland, eagerly.

"I *did*," said Sir James, in an accent of much self-complacency.

"Then I am sure," returned Mrs. Strictland, "Rhoda is to be highly approved for what she has done. I wish, however, that she had communicated your intelligence to me, and I would not have had any thing to do with the odious ribbons either: I would sacrifice them instantly, but that I fear it would look particular."

Sir James, who was quite indifferent as to the manner in which Mrs. Strictland distinguished herself, perfectly co-

incided in this opinion, and the blue cockade kept its place.

Mrs. Strictland felt at this moment that she had all which she wished within her grasp. She could account for Rhoda's having made so public a compliment to the opinion of Sir James only upon the supposition that she thoroughly understood his designs, and was sincerely willing to concur with them. The displeasure, which she had felt against her but the moment before, for what she had called too herself, "an ill-bred contempt of the *bienseances* of *societé*," and which she had imputed to the precepts and example of Lady Randolf, was changed into more complacent feelings. These she testified by a most gracious smile, and a familiar nod, as she stood at some distance from her, pointing at the same time to the extraneous part of her own head-dress, with a look which meant to say that she wished it in the fire.

Rhoda understood nothing of these "nods, and becks, and wreathed smiles;" but was glad to see such apparent approbation of what she had but the moment before recollected might probably draw down upon her the reprehension of so strict an observer of the "*bienseances* of *societé*," as she knew Mrs. Strictland to be.

CHAP. VII.

> "Quick her eye, and changeable its ray,
> As the sun dancing through a vernal day;
> And like the lake, by storm or moonlight seen,
> With dashing furrows, or cerulean mien,
> Her countenance—the mirror of her breast,
> The calm, or trouble of her soul exprest."
>
> *Montgomery*

THE dinner party was this day more than usually full, and there were many, who, seeming only to be guests of the hour, awakened no interest in Rhoda's mind, and on whom she scarcely bestowed a glance; but as she passed to dinner, she heard Colonel Montford say, in reply to the question of "Who's that?"

"Some Oxford prig, I suppose, who is training for a parson."

Rhoda looked round, and her eye met that of Mr. Ponsonby; but she met it at the end of a long line of the least consequential part of the company, and she saw that they were too far removed from each other, even to speak; yet an involuntary exclamation betrayed the emotion that so unexpected an apparition occasioned, and alarmed Sir James, who was by her side.

"What's the matter, my dear Miss Strictland?" said he.

"Oh," cried Rhoda, "I see a friend— a very dear friend; and just now it is impossible to speak to him."

It was, indeed, impossible; for Rhoda was at this moment obliged to take her usual place at the table, and she saw Mr. Ponsonby file off to the side table, with about a dozen others, whose natural modesty, or tutored knowledge of insignificance, led to the "lower seat." All that she could do, was to kiss her hand, and smile; and the smile was so expres-

sive of the pleasure that filled her heart, that Sir James said,

"I hope that 'friend,' that 'very dear friend,' is a near relation?"

"No, indeed he is not," said Rhoda. "He is no relation at all; but we are very well known to each other, and I am sure that he can tell me a great deal of those, whom I love better than any relation, that I have *now* in the world."

The recollection, which these words drew after them, overshadowed Rhoda's countenance with a gravity, that gave an alarm to Sir James, as unexpected as it was painful.

Rhoda thought the dinner unusually tedious; nor did the minutes pass swiftly with Sir James. He had the mortification to find that he could not command the attention of Rhoda for one minute beyond what mere common civility required; and although he had the privilege of being placed by her person, her mind, he was conscious, was elsewhere. He would have preferred resigning the

whole to Mr. Ponsonby, to the tantalizing situation in which he was placed.

"I do hope," said he, endeavouring to excite interest by the subject on which he spoke, "that you will hear well of those friends, who are so happy in your love."

"I have no doubt of it," returned Rhoda. "Indeed I know that they were well two days ago; but Mr. Ponsonby will be able to tell me so many particulars of what I long to know, and we have such a mutual interest in the subject, that a conversation with him will be quite a feast."

Sir James was silenced for a few moments.

"Is your friend one of the Worcestershire Ponsonbys?" said Sir James, endeavouring to overcome himself.

"No," said Rhoda.

"Then he is not related to Sir Marmaduke Ponsonby?" said Sir James.

"Not that I know of," replied Rhoda. "He is, indeed, the only one of his family

with whom I am acquainted; but I have known him almost from my infancy."

Again Sir James was struck dumb.

"An intimacy begun so early with one who is neither a relation, nor to whom you were known by a connection with his family, is something unusual."

"With me it is not unusual," said Rhoda. "Until within these few months, I was never introduced by family connection to any thing that I could love."

Sir James spoke no more; and Rhoda was now left at liberty to pursue the train of thought which the unexpected appearance of Mr. Ponsonby had occasioned.

She had no hope that she should be able to gratify her impatience to converse with him, till the rites of the table were fully accomplished, and she cast her eye round with dismay on the great disproportion between the gentlemen and lady guests, which seemed to threaten a longer secession than usual on the part

of the former, from the drawing-room amusements.

"Pray, my lord," said she, as she passed Lord Randolf, when the ladies withdrew, "break up this formidable congress the moment you can. Every moment, that I lose, is with me an hour."

"Of my company, do you mean, then?" said Lord Randolf, smiling.

"No, no; but of the company of one, who is now in this room. Till we can speak together, I can have no peace."

Lord Randolf, surprised, looked around for the favoured mortal, and thought that he discovered him, by the ardent gaze with which Mr. Ponsonby had, at that moment, fixed his eyes on Rhoda.

This hint was sufficient to make the good-humoured and benevolent Lord Randolf instantly fall into conversation with Mr. Ponsonby; and he was so well pleased with all he said, and his

manner of saying it, that he took the first possible moment of proposing to adjourn to the drawing-room.

"I understand," said he, "that you have a friend here, who longs to speak to you."

Mr. Ponsonby coloured.

"Miss Strictland," said he, "must naturally desire to inquire after her best friends."

"We shall some of us," replied Lord Randolf, "be a little jealous of that title, although, perhaps, we may have no right to dispute it; but Miss Strictland seems formed to make *best* friends wherever she goes."

Again Mr. Ponsonby blushed, as he replied, with a kind of modest earnestness,

"I hope Miss Strictland will at least allow us to be her *earliest* friends."

"I believe you will find Miss Strictland inclined to admit all your claims," said Lord Randolf, good-naturedly; "and

if you please, you shall now have an opportunity of trying them."

Mr. Ponsonby, although Lord Randolf's last words had made him perfectly scarlet, could desire no better; and with trembling joy, he accompanied Lord Randolf into the drawing-room.

"See, I have obeyed your commands," said Lord Randolf, addressing Rhoda. "Mr. Ponsonby desires to render you an account of the welfare of your *earliest* friends."

"My earliest, and my best!" said Rhoda, holding out her hand to Mr. Ponsonby. "How does my dear Mr. Wyburg?—How does my dear Frances? Pray tell me all and every thing."

This little scene operated as an electric shock on Mrs. Strictland. She felt it through every nerve, and without withdrawing her eye one second from Rhoda and Mr. Ponsonby, she kept eagerly questioning Lady Morris, as to the who? and the what? and the why of Mr. Ponsonby?

Lady Morris, busily engaged with Lady Belmont, answered neglectingly, "Really, I don't know—can't tell—some election friend, I suppose—nobody one knows—really I know nothing about the matter."

But it was absolutely necessary for Mrs. Strictland's peace of mind, that she should know something about the matter; and therefore moving gently towards the two friends, now too deeply engaged with each other to perceive her approach, she said with her accustomed suavity,

"My dear Miss Strictland, I think I have an interest in any body whom you seem so glad to see. May I beg the honour to be introduced to your friend?"

Rhoda was by this time sufficiently acquainted with Mrs. Strictland's style, to understand how distant from the sound was often the meaning of her words; and her consciousness of what was passing at the moment in Mrs. Strictland's mind, made her blush.

"Mr. Ponsonby, ma'am," said she, "is giving me an account of my friends at Byrhley. I have the pleasure of hearing that they are very well."

"You have lately been at Byrhley, Sir?" said Mrs. Strictland, with great politeness of tone.

"Not very lately, madam," replied Mr. Ponsonby; "but I had the pleasure of hearing from Mr. Wyburg yesterday."

"And you, my dear, I think, heard this morning," said Mrs. Strictland. "So perhaps you can gratify Mr. Ponsonby with later intelligence than any that he can give you. But when *did* you see our excellent friends? I shall be charmed to hear that Mr. Wyburg preserves his health in this severe season."

Now the fact was, that Mr. Ponsonby had not been at Byrhley since Rhoda left that place, and could by no means pretend to give Mrs. Strictland any very accurate account how Mr. Wyburg resisted the weather of a common English

winter; but he ventured to assure her, that "her excellent friend" was perfectly well; and without affixing any precise date to his information, left her to satisfy herself, as well as she could, with the general bulletin of the health at Byrhley.

If, however, he had been less explicit on the subject of her verbal inquiry, than, from the trifling nature of it, might have been expected, he had given a full answer to the question, which although unasked, was the only one Mrs. Strictland wished to have resolved. She was no longer at a loss as to the subject of the conversation with Mr. Ponsonby, or of the interest which he felt and inspired.

But who then was Mr Ponsonby?

On this point hung all her hopes and fears. She did not recollect that, in her visits to the Hall, she had even heard his name. Lady Morris's "some election friend"—"nobody one knows," hung upon her ear, and appalled her imagina-

tion. She was ready to ask with Sir James Osbourne, "Is he related to Sir Marmaduke Ponsonby?" But even the polite adroitness of Mrs. Strictland could not at this moment find any terms, in which she could convey this inquiry. Yet it was not possible to exist under her present unsatisfied desire.

"One moment, my dear Rhoda," said she; "not too much to break in upon your affectionate inquiries—one moment can you spare me? I will not detain you an instant—merely while you tell me what I shall say in answer to this note. The servant waits;"—shewing at the same time a paper which she held in her hand, and drawing Rhoda towards a writing-table,

"For heaven's sake, who is this Mr. Ponsonby," said she, "whom you have let all the world know that you are so glad to see?"

"Really," replied Rhoda, "I cannot believe that any part of the world will care about who I am glad to see; and if

it should, I ought not to be ashamed to shew the sincere pleasure that I feel at the sight of one of my earliest companions, and most partial friends."

"Ashamed!—Oh no, my dear. I am sure that you will never do any thing of which you ought to be ashamed; but there are certain decorums—certain rules of society—but all depends upon who Mr. Ponsonby is. Pray is he Sir Marmaduke's eldest son?"

"I do not know that he is any son of Sir Marmaduke's," replied Rhoda; "and," added she, a little maliciously, "I do not very precisely know whose son he is."

"My dear Miss Strictland, how am I to understand you? Not know who is the father of your earliest companion, and most partial friend!"

"My dear madam," replied Rhoda, laughing, "I never played at blindman's buff, or puss in the corner, with Mr. Ponsonby's papa; nor has Mr. Ponsonby derived any of his partialities for me, from the pedigree of the old gentleman.

Why should I concern myself to know who, or what he is?"

"It concerns me to know, my dear," replied Mrs. Strictland, solemnly. "You are under my guardianship, and I owe it to your family, not to suffer you to retain any improper connection."

"I hope, madam," replied Rhoda, proudly, "there is in that respect no occasion for any guardianship but my own. Mr. Ponsonby is a gentleman. He was a pupil of Mr. Wyburg's, for several years. We grew up together, and I hope that we shall continue friends through life; but as to what son of Adam he descends from, or how many acres of his mother's earth he is heir to, I do assure you, I have yet to learn; and I hope that they are not questions on which my esteem for Mr. Ponsonby need depend."

"They are questions on which your intimacy with Mr. Ponsonby must depend," returned Mrs. Strictland. "I am astonished, that after the experience of the last three weeks, you should still

be so unknowing in the ways of the world. A most brilliant career is opened before you: pursue it, and your fortune is made; but really, if you still continue to speak all you think, and look all you feel, it will be in vain that I exert all my skill, and use all my industry, to procure you an establishment."

"Oh, my dear Mrs. Strictland," cried Rhoda, "pray spare yourself all this trouble. Be your castles ever so firmly grounded, my unlucky hand, at some unfortunate moment, will sweep them away, as if they were houses of cards. Chance, not wisdom, must decide my destiny; and so pray let us return to Mr. Ponsonby, for I have not half exhausted the questions that I have to ask him."

"You must do as you please, Miss Strictland," replied Mrs. Strictland, gravely, "for I see that you will be mistress; but remember that the option is between poverty and riches. You know how you have lived. You see

here how you may live. It is worth a little thinking, whether you will be the envy, or the pity, of those who know you."

Mrs. Strictland could not have stated the case more unfortunately for the cause of reason and virtue: Rhoda's high spirit revolted from the word pity. Her vanity fluttered at the thought of exciting envy, and she returned to Mr. Ponsonby, with a consciousness that the pleasure, with which she had listened to him but the moment before, was lessened; but this consciousness lasted but an instant. The truth and order which breathed in all his expressions—the charm which attaches to the recollection of past scenes—the principles of rectitude and good taste which were rooted in the mind of Rhoda, soon dissipated the passing cloud of folly, and she gave her whole attention, and as it seemed, her very soul, so much to Mr. Ponsonby, as wholly to destroy the polite equanimity of Mrs. Strictland's temper; and to throw Sir James Osbourne

into despair. At no moment did his hopes so nearly "totter to their fall."

Rhoda's heart beat responsive to the accents of Mr. Ponsonby: it swelled with every feeling that he wished to inspire; and if these feelings did not overflow at her lips, it was not the "dignity that would not unsought be won;"—it was not her "boasted knowledge of human nature;"—it was still less any doubt of her own wishes, or her future intentions, that restrained the expression: it was the bashfulness of native purity—it was the timidity of real love, that held her silent;—but so expressive was the crimsoned cheek—so unequivocal the downcast eye; that the happy lover would not have exchanged this dumb eloquence for the most explicit acknowledgment of reciprocal affection, that the most fluent utterance could have poured on his ear.

"What pleasure I shall give our dear friends the Wyburgs," said Mr. Ponsonby, "when I tell them that I have

seen you! and that I have *thus* seen you—so unchanged!—so much yourself!"

"Ask me to dance," said Rhoda, "or they part us."

And such, indeed, was Mrs. Strictland's intention. She approached with Colonel Montford by her side; for Sir James Osborne was at that moment in too bad a temper to be at her disposal.

"Come," said she, playfully, "I really must break up this *tête-à-tête*. My dear Rhoda, you must have wearied Mr. Ponsonby to death, with all the details you have extorted from him. It is time to release him; and here Colonel Montford is come to claim your hand. You see every body is preparing to dance."

"We have foreseen it," said Mr. Ponsonby, smiling; "and I flatter myself, that Miss Strictland will not withdraw the honour that she has permitted me to aspire to."

As he said these words, he offered his hand to Rhoda.

"Oh," said Rhoda, "I should be very bad company to any body, but Mr. Ponsonby, this evening; for I can talk of nothing but Byrhley, and I can think of nothing but its dear inhabitants."

Colonel Montford sulkily and silently walked away, and Mrs. Strictland, entirely defeated, darted a look of displeasure at Rhoda, ill agreeing with the soft unruffled manner with which she glided away from the object of her anger, and mingled again with the rest of the company. She looked around, to see in what way Sir James Osbourne would dispose of himself; and saw, with infinite satisfaction, that he had withdrawn from the gay group, who were busy in forming their dancing arrangements, and affected to be wholly intent on a book of prints, which lay on a table, in a distant part of the room.

She suffered him to devour his chagrin alone for some little time; and then winning her way to him in that easy, careless manner, with which she at-

tempted to conceal her most resolute designs, placed herself at his side.

"You don't dance to-night, Sir James," said she. "I don't wonder at you; there is such a crowd, and there are so many people whom one knows nothing of. These election duties are very severe; but don't you think it would be fair that they should be confined to those who are to benefit from them? Why is poor Rhoda to pay the price for Sir Stapleton's votes?"

"Has Miss Strictland any thing to do with Sir Frampton's electioneering manœuvres?" coldly asked Sir James.

"Why, perhaps, not strictly any thing to do with them; but you know when she is aware how matters stand, and that a little civility to these people, who are to be kept in good humour, will be very well taken, the *bienséances* of *societé* absolutely require one to pay this civility; and indeed, Lady Morris almost as good as asked Rhoda to do her best to conciliate Mr. Ponsonby. I think I have

understood that there is not only great interest there, but an apprehension that it may be a hostile interest."

"I had understood that Miss Strictland was previously acquainted with Mr. Ponsonby," said Sir James.

"Yes, that was the misfortune. On that plan Lady Morris went: for you know, had Rhoda failed ever so little in her usual cordiality to her old acquaintance, it would have been imputed to, I know not what vulgar notion, of being in fine company; and then the young man's pride would have taken the alarm, and he would have revenged his own quarrel on Sir Frampton's hopes. Oh, this was so evident, that we none of us could fail to be aware of it; and Rhoda would have been unpardonable, if any inadvertence on her part had occasioned an injury to Sir Frampton's affairs."

"There seems to have been little cause for fear of any such inadvertence," returned Sir James; "for I never before saw Miss Strictland so entirely engrossed

by any person with whom she conversed; and she listens to Mr. Ponsonby, as if there was not another sound in the room."

"Yes, she is a dear enthusiast!" replied Mrs. Strictland. "It is impossible not to love her the better for such *devouement*; though perhaps a ball-room is not exactly the place where one could wish it to be shewn: but you are aware, I suppose, of the subject that thus runs away with her?"

"Nobody, I think, can doubt for a moment, of that!" said Sir James, with a tone of mingled anger and sorrow.

"Well, and can any thing be more amiable?—thus to forget the splendour, the gaiety, and adoration, I may say, with which she is surrounded, and to return thought, heart, and soul to the little vicarial cottage where she passed so many of her earliest days—to lose sight of the talents and fashion around her—and to see and think only of a poor country parson, and the good girl, his

daughter, because the one was her tutor, and the other her playfellow, in her nursery years?"

"Mr. Ponsonby was also a playfellow, I apprehend," said Sir James.

"Oh dear, no such thing; indeed, how could he?—Mr. Wyburg is not a school-master—a most respectable clergyman, I can assure you; and, as I understand, charged himself, at the earnest request of Mr. Ponsonby's father, with the care of him, only those two important years, previous to his being sent to college. Of course Rhoda must have become acquainted with him, as he made a member of the family where she was domesticated, as it were; but no bringing up together—no mutual recollection of youthful pleasures and pains—nothing of that sort, I am positive."

"Miss Strictland called him, to me," said Sir James, "'a friend—a very dear friend.' I could not mistake the words."

"Yes, yes, we all know her strong

manner of expression. If she had fallen in with a dog that she had known at Byrhley, she would have called him her friend, her very dear friend; but so little does she really care for, or know of Mr. Ponsonby, that she cannot tell me whether he is related to Sir Marmaduke Ponsonby, or whether his family is of Hampshire, or Worcestershire."

"His attractions, then," thought Sir James, "are wholly personal!"—and his sigh was the deeper for the thought, and his brow the more contracted. He remained silent; for of all that was passing in his mind, he was not disposed to make Mrs. Strictland the confident of any part.

She perceived that all her glosses had failed to disguise the truth; and that the qualified phrases, "as good as asked," "I think I have understood," and others of the same complexion, had compromised her own integrity, without deceiving Sir James. Success with Mrs. Strictland sanctified all means; a failure

in the end could alone disconcert her. She felt on this occasion the tell-tale colour rise in her cheek; but endeavouring to rally,

"My dear Sir James, I really fear that you are not well. I hope you are not beginning to have this odious influenza. Pray let me prescribe for you: take my advice, and attack the enemy before he is too strong."

"I will take your advice," said Sir James, "and will retire immediately to my own room, for I feel myself very bad company."

"Oh not so early!—I assure you that it is not a good thing. Let you and me have a quiet game at picquet; it will do you more good than shutting yourself up in your room at this unseasonable hour."

Sir James smiled, and bowed, and wished Mrs. Strictland good night, adding, "I shall be quite well, to-morrow, I have no doubt."

"So I fear," thought Mrs. Strictland;

for she now saw a strength of character in Sir James, which convinced her, that however he might be a victim to the charms of Rhoda, he could never be the dupe of matrimonial manœuvring.

Burning with rage against Rhoda, she returned towards the dancers; but Rhoda and Mr. Ponsonby no longer made any part of them. The first dance was over, and Rhoda, complaining of fatigue, had seated herself, Mr. Ponsonby by her side, with a declaration that she should dance no more.

"My dear Rhoda, I am so grieved—so alarmed!—I am told that you are not well. This horrible influenza will kill us all—and its attacks are so insidious, totally taking away the strength, without the least warning! I must beg, my dear, that you will go directly to bed. Doctor Wilmot says, that if not taken in time, there is nothing which may not be apprehended."

"My dear madam, I do assure you, that I am perfectly well."

"Oh, my dear, don't carry your attentions to my feelings so far. You cannot impose upon my tenderness. Perfectly well, and so much fatigued with a single dance! — Impossible! — You who can dance for hours together!"

"A temporary fatigue," said Rhoda. "I shall dance again presently."

"Not for the world!—It might be death! This sudden prostration of strength, Doctor Wilmot says, is the most alarming of all symptoms. My dear, if you would not make me quite wretched, do pray oblige me, and go to your own room.—Sir," said Mrs. Strictland, speaking to a servant, "be so kind as to tell Miss Strictland's maid to go to Miss Strictland's room. Miss Strictland is coming there immediately: she is not well."

"My dear Madam," said Rhoda, "pray don't make yourself uneasy. Don't give yourself such an unnecessary alarm."

"No, no, my dear, I won't be uneasy. I won't give myself any alarm, if you will only oblige me. Nay, I must insist upon it. Take my arm—I will see you to your room."

So saying, she drew Rhoda's reluctant arm under her's, and with a slight movement of civility to Mr. Ponsonby, who stood by, petrified with astonishment, and totally at a loss to conceive what all this meant, she was leading away her prisoner, when Rhoda said,

"If, indeed, you will not believe me, that I am quite well—if I must go, let me at least say adieu to Mr. Ponsonby; let me charge him with my kindest, my most affectionate remembrances to my friends at Byrhley." Then holding out her hand to Mr. Ponsonby, "Good bye," said she. "I am delighted to have seen you. You know all that you must say to Mr. and Miss Wyburg, and I hope we shall meet soon in town."

Mr. Ponsonby gently pressed her fair

hand in his, and longed to have raised it to his lips, but durst not.

Mrs. Strictland drew Rhoda away; and Mr. Ponsonby having followed her with his eyes, till the door of the room shut her from his sight, forgot, as she lessened to the view, that there was in the world any other object.

CHAP. VIII.

———" How can this trouble rise,
This shame and pain, from creatures I despise?"
———" The prevailing cause
Is thy delight in listening to applause."

Crabbe.

Never had Mrs. Strictland's systematic good breeding been put to a more severe trial. It would have done her good to have beaten Rhoda; and perhaps she must have had recourse to this expedient, had she not been a perfect mistress of that *polished rudeness*, which enables the tongue not to offend the ear, while it lacerates the heart.

" If you knew, Miss Strictland, how tenderly, how solicitously I love you, you would then be able to conceive the misery that you have this night occa-

sioned me; but, till you are a mother yourself, my dear, for you are as a daughter to me, you will never be able to conceive this: but I should have thought, that the common rules of society, even natural taste"——

"For heaven's sake, madam," interrupted Rhoda, "what have I done?—What is it that discomposes you so?"

"You have done nothing, my dear, morally wrong, I acknowledge," said Mrs. Strictland; "nothing, indeed, I hope, that can draw after it any fatal consequences; for, no doubt, it will be easy to convince the only person whose opinion is of real importance, of what you and I know to be the truth: but to give the whole room reason to believe that a somebody, whom nobody knows, a gawky collegian, 'a person of no rank or likelihood,' is a favourite with you! How could you, my dear, suffer your affection for your Byrhley friends thus to blind you to all sense of propriety?—How difficult will it be to make people

believe, that all the distinction which you shewed Mr. Ponsonby, was wholly for the sake of Mr. and Miss Wyburg!"

"Indeed, ma'am, it was far from being wholly for their sakes," replied Rhoda, "that I took pleasure in the conversation of Mr. Ponsonby. I consider him as one of my best friends; and I am really indifferent as to who, or how many of those who composed the company to-night, know that this is the case."

"Including me, I suppose, in the number of those, to whose opinion you are indifferent?" said Mrs. Strictland.

"No, my dear madam," said Rhoda. "Your opinion can never be indifferent to me. I know how kindly, how materially you are interested for me; but when I repeat, that Mr. Ponsonby is by birth a gentleman—that the superiority of his intellect, and the integrity of his morals, have already secured him the friendship of men of talents, and of worth, I cannot believe you will think that I

have violated any rule of propriety, or betrayed any want of taste, by the pleasure which I have manifested on so unexpectedly meeting the companion of my early youth, and one of the most distinguished members of that hospitable family, to whose kindness I owe the capacity for every happiness which awaits my future life."

"Very true, my love; and this state of the case makes every thing simple, and natural, and indifferent: but so many other conclusions will be drawn, which will be as injurious to you, as though they were not all absolutely false, that really while we do live in this world, we must a little consider what the world will say of us;—and then Sir James Osbourne!—What do you suppose that he will think?"

"Nothing, I am sure, that can give me any concern," said Rhoda.

"Why, no. I cannot believe that he will: he is so well-judging, and sees things in so true a light; and besides, I

have let him into the truth of things. It is easy to make him hear reason; but in such a world as you are surrounded with, I know every thing must go *à travers*—and what frights, and agonies, and manœuvrings have I gone through this night! You really must make me some compensation. You must follow up the idea that I have given Sir James. You must give him an absolute conviction of the truth. Your little temporary fatigue is the finest cover in the world. He was himself *un peu malade* to-night. At breakfast you may compare notes, and pity each other, and all will be again *en train*."

"I really do not know for what," said Rhoda; "nor can I understand what can have given rise to all this disturbance. To my apprehension every thing has happened very naturally; and unless, my dear madam, you have been discomposed, I really cannot wish any thing otherwise than as it is, except, indeed, that I had much rather at this

moment be enjoying myself in the drawing-room, than be shut up here four hours before the house will be still enough to give me any chance of sleep."

"No, no, my dear Rhoda," said Mrs. Strictland, smiling. "You must stay where you are this evening, and may think yourself well quit, for so small a sacrifice, after the scrape you had got into; but now pray, tell me what could you mean by saying, that you hoped to see Mr. and Miss Wyburg in town?"

"I am not aware that I did say so," replied Rhoda.

"They were the very last words that you uttered to Mr. Ponsonby," returned Mrs. Strictland.

"Then I spoke like a simpleton," said Rhoda; "for I meant to say, that I hoped to see Mr. Ponsonby in town."

Mrs. Strictland's cheek became crimson.

"Surely I do not hear you aright?" said she. "What!—Make an assignation with a young man!—Invite him to visit

you!—And pray, to whose house did you invite him?"

"I never thought of inviting him to any house," said Rhoda, confounded by the unusual vehemence into which Mrs. Strictland had been betrayed. "He had said that business would bring him to town in the course of the spring, and I only meant to say that I hoped we should meet."

"And that was saying much, *too* much," returned Mrs. Strictland. "Indeed, Rhoda, you are a perfect child; and if you must be taught, I am afraid you must be ruled. Your destiny is in your own hand. You may be the wife of Sir James Osbourne, if you will; and as his wife, you may command all that gives distinction to life—all that the happy possess, and the envious pine for. As Lady Osbourne, you secure my affection and countenance for ever: but there is a reverse to the medal. I leave you to think of it, and to make your option."

At this moment Rhoda felt no difficulty in making her option. The pomps and vanities of the world, with Sir James Osbourne, as the dispenser of them, weighed light in the balance, against the affection, the talents, the excellencies of Mr. Ponsonby and his parsonage.

"Why should Mrs. Strictland care so much about my marrying greatly?" thought Rhoda. "If she really love me, she will be best pleased that I should marry happily; and happy I shall be with Mr. Ponsonby. My heart, my taste, and my principles, tell me that I shall. It is true that I should not like to be despised; but what is there despicable in the situation that I shall fill? And as to being envied!—Oh surely, I cannot be so narrow-minded, as to make the envy of others a part of my happiness."

So Rhoda thought and felt, when she embodied the pleasure which she took in being better dressed, more admired, more distinguished than her companions, in

the intelligible word *envy*; but the pleasure itself, too subtle to be restrained, and too vague to be defined, spread its influence, notwithstanding, unchecked and unperceived, through every little occurrence of every passing hour, and warped the judgment, and corrupted the heart.

At this happy moment, however, each was in its natural state of excellence: the understanding discerned what was best, and the affections cherished it.

"I shall now have no mortifying confession to make to Lady Randolf," thought Rhoda. "She will approve all that I feel. How I wish that Mrs. Strictland would do so too!"

Rhoda could not have formed a vainer wish. Independent of the pleasure which Mrs. Strictland took in the conduct of the affairs of others, and especially in all that related to matrimony, in the way of establishment, she attached much of her own future importance to placing Rhoda in a splendid situation. The triumph

that would result from having secured the prize, which had so often been the object of elaborate intrigue, and of despair to so many of her superiors in the means of obtaining it, had determined her, if possible, to make Sir James Osbourne the instrument of raising Rhoda to the height to which she so much wished to exalt her; and while she considered such elevation as only another word for the perfection of female happiness, she doubted not, but that in exerting her every faculty to secure it to Rhoda, she gave an unequivocal proof of the love, which she had succeeded in persuading herself that she really entertained for her.

The morning drive—the circumstance of the discarded ribbon—Sir James's self-complacency, when he spoke of Rhoda; had convinced her, but one short hour before Mr. Ponsonby made his appearance, that all which she wished was in her possession.—Was it for female patience to bear with equanimity so un-

looked-for, so provoking a reverse? She thought she saw Sir James, with one vigorous effort, shake his chains from him; and she beheld Rhoda in open rebellion to her will—escaped from the snares of vanity and self-love, which she had so ably spread around her.

But while there was a possibility of success, Mrs. Strictland was not of a temper to despair. She had with reason much confidence in her own powers of management; and she thought that she knew the female heart too well, to be alarmed as to the final struggle between the distinctions, and the happiness of life.

In an instant of sudden irritation, she had expressed herself with a warmth and tone of authority, which a moment's reflection had shewn her to be of all things the most likely to revolt the pride of Rhoda; and she felt that if she once provoked her to set herself in open opposition to her opinion, that the game was up for ever. Influenced by these con-

siderations, she would not retire for the night, without making Rhoda a visit.

A gentle tap at her door, as she passed in the way to her own apartment, was followed by as gentle an opening of the door, and an entrance on tip-toe,

"Oh, my love!—What, you are not in bed? I shall not, then, I hope, disturb you. Are you quite discreet to sit up so late?—But I dare say, you know best. One always does, as to one's feelings; and you really look so well, that I could almost flatter myself nothing material ails you."

"Nothing of any kind, I do assure you, ails me," said Rhoda; "unless having been shut up here all the evening, instead of enjoying myself below."

"My dear, you have lost nothing by your absence. I can hardly describe to you how dull we have all been. I never saw such a party at Overleigh Park; but Lady Morris says, very truly, such things must be done sometimes, especially at Christmas: but it was such a

relief when all the Oxonians, and all those other strange-looking people took themselves away, that we all felt as if a weight was taken off our shoulders; and I thought that we should at least have had one gay half hour to have made amends for what we had suffered all the rest of the evening, and to have sent us to bed in good temper, and good spirits— but Lady Morris damped the cheerfulness of the young ladies, by dropping a hint, that she should have been much obliged to them, if they could have commanded themselves for one single night sufficiently, to have made the time pass agreeably to guests, whom the interests of Sir Frampton had obliged her to mingle with better society. Some mothers looked reproach upon their daughters, while each was eager to make her defence. One had a head-ache; another had tired herself with walking; a third had sprained her ancle: but Lady Belmont scorned to temporize.

" 'I must take Harriet's misdemeanors

on my own shoulders,' said she, looking full at Lady Morris. 'It was by my express orders that she did *not* dance. I abominate all rudeness; and when I saw what a motley crew was got together, so unlike, I must confess, to your usual select society, my dear Lady Morris, I thought it best at once to cut the gordian knot, and by declining all, offend none.'

"Your ladyship judged extremely well, as you always do," replied Lady Morris. "Yet I cannot help feeling obliged to the good humour of Miss Strictland, who did not permit even a serious indisposition to prevent her from doing what she thought obliging."

"Oh, Miss Strictland!"——returned Lady Belmont.

"And this 'Oh, Miss Strictland,' was uttered in such a tone of voice, my dear Rhoda, as really mortified me to the quick. It spoke volumes;—it never could have been said of a person, who

Lady Belmont had believed, had Sir James Osbourne in her power."

The very echo of this "Oh, Miss Strictland," was not without its effects on Rhoda's nerves. She replied only,

"Lady Belmont has certainly no reason to suppose that Sir James Osbourne is in my power."

A smile of kind incredulity, as if she had said, "you know better, my dear," was the return made by Mrs. Strictland.

"Well, the triumph will only be the greater, when she *must* believe it," was all that she said. "But, my love, it is barbarous to keep you up—so good night. Oh, one word, my dear. You must not come down in the morning, as if nothing had really been the matter with you; but don't disguise yourself. Draw that lovely French handkerchief, which I have seen you dispose so beautifully, through your hair lightly, and just fasten it under your chin, so as to shew your throat to advantage. I hope it will be sufficient

to guarantee you from any further mischief. Good night."

"Good night," repeated Rhoda, languidly. "It is very provoking," thought she, "that there should be so many impertinent people in the world!—If I could once convince Lady Belmont that I had refused Sir James Osbourne—Oh foolish Rhoda!" exclaimed she. "Dear dear Lady Randolf, come to my assistance."

But it was needless: her good sense had for that time broke the spell which her vanity had formed. The triumph was the triumph of moral feeling, and of Mr. Ponsonby's; and she retired to the sweet and balmy slumbers which are the usual attendants on self-approbation.

CHAP. IX.

> " The persiflage, the unfeeling jeer,
> The civil, grave, ironic sneer,
> The laugh which more than censure wounds,
> Which more than argument confounds."
>
> *Moore.*

RHODA arose the next morning so free from any intimation of sickness, that she would infallibly have forgotten the evening admonition in favour of the embroidered handkerchief, had not Mrs. Wilson brought a message from her lady, to remind her of it.

" Mrs. Strictland begs, ma'am, that you will be particularly careful not to cover too much of your hair with the French handkerchief. I believe, ma'am, that she wishes it to be drawn through, and just"——

"I understand—" said Rhoda.

"Yes, indeed, ma'am, nobody *better*, the art of dressing; and I am sure it answers—for if you, madam, were but to hear half that I hear——"

"Oh, I cannot hear it now, Wilson. Mrs. Strictland wants you, and I do not," said Rhoda, to whom Mrs. Wilson's ways and flatteries became every day more disagreeable.

"Well," thought Rhoda; "there will be no place for a Mrs. Wilson at Mr. Ponsonby's parsonage, and that will be a blessing."

Of this blessing, and of others much more important that she hoped would accompany it, Rhoda's head and heart were so full, that she had been seated some time at the breakfast-table, before she observed that Sir James Osbourne was not there; nor when she did observe it, did his absence excite the smallest pain, or awaken the least curiosity.

Not so Mrs. Strictland. She had

watched the opening door every time that it turned upon its hinges, with a solicitude, which could not have been greater, had she expected that her own embroidered handkerchief, rather than Rhoda's, would have been the object of his admiration ; but she watched in vain. No Sir James Osbourne appeared ; and what was still more extraordinary, neither did his absence seem to occasion any surprise, or inquiry : yet awed by the acute malice of Lady Belmont, she resolved not to betray, by any questions of her own, an expectation that she now began to fear, would not be gratified.

But Mrs. Strictland was the victim of an irritability of temper and nerve, that sometimes overcome in an instant, the cold-hearted, and cold-blooded arguments of several previous hours. Fretted at this moment beyond all endurance, she said to Lady Morris, in a low voice, when she thought that Lady Belmont's attention was otherwise engaged,

" I fear poor Sir James Osbourne is

seriously ill. He complained very much last night; and not being able to leave his room this morning, is a sign, I fear, that he is not better."

"If he had not left his room," said Lady Morris, "I should have thought so too; but I hope he is quite well. He left Overleigh this morning, almost as soon as it was light."

"Left Overleigh!" exclaimed Mrs. Strictland, with an involuntary expression of chagrin, that she found it impossible to repress.

"Oh sing willow, sing willow, sing all a green willow," said Lady Belmont, with the faint laugh of gratified malice, which painted her meaning full on the feelings of Mrs. Strictland, though she added, as if pursuing her discourse, "I really think I am more sorry for poor Desdemona at that moment, than when her brute of a husband suffocates her."

"I thought," said Lady Morris to Mrs. Strictland, "that you had known all Sir James Osbourne's plans."

"Oh yes, to be sure," stammered Mrs. Strictland. "I knew that Sir James intended to go to town directly; but he was so ill last night, that I could not have thought—I dare say he is gone for advice."

"And very prudently done," said Lady Belmont, with the most profound gravity; "for I am sure he was in great danger here."

Rhoda's unvarying countenance, as she continued to converse gaily with Lord and Lady Randolf, deprived Lady Belmont of half her triumph; but the confusion of Mrs. Strictland was so complete, that any body, less avaricious of this kind of glory than her ladyship, might have rested satisfied.

Yet to deepen the rose on Rhoda's cheek, was what she was resolved to accomplish, if possible; and following up the blow, she said to Lady Harriet, as she marched arm in arm with her out of the room,

"One, two, and three, my dear; and

if those that *should*, *won't*, those that *will*, *may*."

"You will never teach me to be above the malice of that woman," said Rhoda to Lady Randolf, colouring a deep crimson, which a backward glance of Lady Belmont only served to heighten.

"If you would once shew her that you are above it, you disarm her," replied Lady Randolf. "It is not Lady Belmont's strength, but your weakness, that makes the evil."

"It is, I fear, incurable," said Rhoda, with a sigh.

Mrs. Strictland approaching them, said,

"Rhoda, my dear, I want to consult you. Our visit here has been quite unconscionable; and notwithstanding Lady Morris's kind solicitations to the contrary, must come to an end. We think of going to-morrow."

"I put my negative upon any such resolution," said Lady Randolf. "My dear madam, I will confess that I have a

design against you, and that I have been endeavouring to draw Miss Strictland into the plot. Will not her interest prevail with you, to give me your company for a little time at Temple Harcourt? We shall leave Overleigh on Monday next; and if I could induce you to accompany us home, I shall have the thanks of Lady Morris for procuring her the pleasure of your society a little longer, and Lord Randolf and myself shall consider your compliance with our request as a very flattering obligation."

It was impossible that any invitation could have come more seasonably. An immediate return to town, was by no means what Mrs. Strictland wished. She thought that more might be gained by suffering Sir James Osbourne's ill-humour to evaporate in absence, than by the irritation that would probably be produced by a fresh attack, when he was so well-prepared for resistance. It was a point gained, if she could make him wish for the return of Rhoda; but the

malice of Lady Belmont, and the cool indifference of Lady Morris, had so thoroughly piqued Mrs. Strictland, that she was resolved, at whatever cost, to exonerate herself from their effects. She was well aware that absence alone could do this; for after the unfortunate discovery which she had made of her disappointment, with respect to Sir James, she knew that every hour while she remained in the present company, she would be exposed to mortification.

An invitation, therefore, to Temple Harcourt, at this moment, seemed to be a protection for which she could not be too grateful. She well knew the honour that it would cast around her; for however she might affect to stigmatise Lady Randolf as dull, or to despise her as a person unknown and unknowing in the ways and society of *the world*, she was conscious that an admittance into the domestic circle of Temple Harcourt, was a distinction which would be felt even in those regions of fashion, where only

she thought it life to live. Half the disgust that she felt towards Lady Randolf, arose from her not having received such a distinction in any former year; and though her vanity might be a little wounded by a consciousness that she owed it now, rather to the attractions of Rhoda, than to any merit of her own, yet as her pleasures depended more upon the appearance, than the reality of things, she well knew how to content herself with the semblance of a compliment, the substance of which she knew belonged to another.

Lady Randolf's proposition, therefore, met from Mrs. Strictland a most ready and gracious acceptance. Rhoda could have danced for joy; and Mr. Strictland, who was indifferent at what other person's table he enjoyed the luxuries which he grudged himself at his own, silently acquiesced in the arrangement.

The desire to see more of Rhoda, and the hope that she might contribute to fortify her mind against the allurements

of vanity, and the attractions of splendour and dissipation, had first suggested to Lady Randolf a wish to take her with her to Temple Harcourt; and when first this wish arose, she would have been glad, if she could have separated her from her companions: but the malice and civil contempt, with which Lady Belmont and Lady Morris had lately treated Mrs. Strictland, had determined Lady Randolf to spread her *ægis* before her also; and the scene of the present morning had given such activity to her good nature, that nothing could be more cordial and warm than the manner in which she urged her request, that they might all together adjourn to Temple Harcourt.

Having gained her point, Lady Randolf accompanied her *protegées* to the drawing-room; and there declaring, in the most obliging terms, the acquisition which she had made, she left Mrs. Strictland restored to her self-compla-

cency, and withdrew to attend upon her usual duties of the morning.

"You do not return, then, to town immediately?" said Lady Belmont.

"Oh, no," replied Mrs. Strictland, with more than usual sweetness; "it was never my intention. I had other engagements. A very little of town satisfies me, and Miss Strictland has a decided taste for the country, even at this season; and I am sure that we shall both prefer the society of Lady Randolf to all its pleasures, at any time."

"My dear Mrs. Strictland," said Lady Morris, "how long have you thought my good sister-in-law so amusing?"

"Just ten minutes and twenty seconds," said Lady Belmont, looking at her watch. "Then, Harriet, my watch loses after all."

"I believe that all our watches lose," said Lady Morris, with a half yawn; "for we seem to be for ever the victims of miscalculation."

This stroke, which was equally felt by Lady Belmont and Mrs. Strictland, brought both the ladies to order; and a sort of tacit peace being established, the few days, which they afterwards passed together, glided away in tolerable harmony. With Rhoda they flew on the wings of delight.

The party in the house was reduced to a very limited number; nor did it contain any individual that particularly called forth the politics of Mrs. Strictland. Rhoda was therefore left to dispose of her ornaments, and her time, according to her own fancy. The one received a grace, even from the negligence with which she wore them; and the other was almost exclusively dedicated t Lady Randolf.

To her she disclosed all that had passed in her heart, and all that was passing there. She confessed her former aberrations; she promised adherence to the narrower line, for the future; and she called upon Lady Randolf to con-

firm her in opinions and feelings, on which she knew that her rectitude and her happiness must depend.

"Then after all," said Lady Randolf, "Mr. Ponsonby is to be the man?"

"And ought he not to be so?" said Rhoda.

"The *ought* depends upon yourself, my dear," returned Lady Randolf. "If he is really chosen, be not tempted to forego your choice, by whatever dazzling bait may cross your path."

"Do you think me capable of such a dereliction," said Rhoda, "when I have told you, that I now know myself?— After I have confessed, that I have given Mr. Ponsonby cause to know me too?"

"Your best security will be in a diffidence of your strength," said Lady Randolf; "and in trials of what it can bear amidst the jarring elements that compose the world, in which you are going to live."

"Of what are those jarring elements composed?" said Rhoda.

"Of envy—of contempt—of ridicule—love of distinction—pleasure of triumph—gratification of sense—indulgencies of affluence."

"I wish I was at Byrhley," said Rhoda.

"Be yourself, my dear Rhoda, and it signifies not where you are."

"So I have been told before," said Rhoda, with a sigh; "but this self is composed of almost as many jarring elements as the world that it is to contend against. We can never harmonize. I wish I was sure that we should quarrel."

"It is not wise to quarrel with the world," said Lady Randolf; "but it is wise to be above it."

"Oh then, I am in the right way," said Rhoda; "for I despise it heartily."

"Not *quite* right," said Lady Randolf. "If you do not learn to appreciate its *real* value, you will never know what you ought to prefer to it."

"Oh for the science which would teach me *that!*" said Rhoda.

"I will give it you in two words," said Lady Randolf:—Time—and—Eternity!"

Rhoda threw her arms round Lady Randolf's neck.

"Oh, my dear Lady Randolf, you have, indeed, given me the knowledge that I wished.—Yes, I will live for ever!"

CHAP. X.

> " The sense to value riches, with the art
> T' enjoy them, and the virtue to impart:
> Not meanly, or ambitiously pursu'd;
> Not sunk by sloth, nor raised by servitude.
> To balance fortune by a just expense,
> Join with economy, magnificence;
> With splendour, charity—with plenty, health."
>
> *Pope.*

In this spiritualized determination Rhoda was more confirmed, after a fortnight's residence at Temple Harcourt.

She here beheld Lady Randolf's theory in the most active operation. She beheld every demand that time could make, or rank, opulence, and the civilities of social life, discharged with the most cheerful urbanity; but she saw its transitory rights in due subserviency to those of eternity.

Hence, was there magnificence, without ostentation;—politeness, without duplicity;—plenty, without profusion. The guests were sufficiently numerous to give an air of social festivity to the assemblage, and so limited, as not to preclude an intercourse with all. Each, in turn, might become a centre to the whole; and the talent of each individual made a part of the general amusement. Here were no exclusive coteries formed by rank and fastidiousness—no line of demarcation between guests of the same host—no umbrage—no whisperings—no manœuvrings;—all was brilliant as the sun, and lucid as truth!

Lord and Lady Randolf were the animating spirits of this well-organized form.

Bland, gracious, and festive, Lord Randolf seemed to exist but for the purpose of communicating pleasure; while Lady Randolf, who, in the house of another person, had withdrawn herself

many hours in every day, from the frivolities and chicaneries of society, and who had even partaken of its better parts in a guarded manner, in her own, appeared to be the most unoccupied person there. Lady Randolf had no morning languors — no evening weariness. Prompt to suggest, and ardent to advance every plan of amusement, she was herself the most joyous of the group: ready alike to read aloud the play, the novel, or the poem—to take her place at the instrument, if a performer was wanted—or to mingle in the dance, when the set was not numerous enough without her; nor was she less willing to become silent and sedentary, when the graver heads, or less active limbs of some of the company called for a party at chess, or a game at whist. She was, indeed, the resource of all.—" I will go to Lady Randolf"— " Lady Randolf will do it for me"— " Lady Randolf will contrive"—" I am sure we shall go, if I speak to Lady

Randolf," resounded from every mouth; and of all her numerous expectants, none was ever disappointed.

Rhoda looked on with wonder and delight.

"Oh could I ever resemble Lady Randolf!" thought she. "But how is all this managed?" said she, to the object of her increasing admiration. "How have you time for all that you do?—You seem to have more time at your disposal at home, than you had at Overleigh Park?"

"I have, in fact, more time," returned Lady Randolf; "because when I intend to enjoy my friends, I make such previous arrangements as enable me to devote myself wholly to them. It is the diligent scholar that has the most time to give to his sports, and he pursues them without remorse, and without fear. Besides, you may observe that my most mighty cares are here entirely taken off my hands: the interests of my nursery

and my school-room, are safe in the hands of Mrs. Drake. When I was at Overleigh Park, my two eldest girls were with me, and I felt myself responsible to them, not only for their regular hours of instruction, but for the indemnification that they might reasonably expect, for being so much secluded from society as I thought it expedient should be the case there. Of course, I made myself as much their companion as possible; and often, when I knew that I was the ridicule of the drawing-room, for the indiscreet zeal with which I was supposed to be overloading their tender brains with more instruction than they could carry, my children and myself were engaged in the most perfect follies—myself the greatest, and perhaps, the happiest baby, of the three. But now, that I know their lessons and their amusements are equally well provided for, I can withdraw my eyes from them for a season, without any fear, or any

other regret, than for the selfish pleasure which I take in being their instructor, and their playmate."

"But this, I hope," said Rhoda, "is in some measure compensated, by having them so much more with you in company here, than at Overleigh. There, poor little souls, one could scarcely catch a glimpse of their garments,—here, I meet one or other of them at every turn, and all seem so happy—so familiar—and so good-humoured!"

"Not to spoil my children, is the only rule that I ever presume to give any of my guests," said Lady Randolf; "and as I am known to be perfectly in earnest, and that the infringement of it would be the signal of imprisonment for my children, I have reason to believe that it is sufficiently well observed. A little experience of the world which they are some time to inhabit, coming by degrees, and accompanied by the correctives that the sapience of Mrs. Drake

and I can furnish, is not amiss. But I will confess to you, my dear Rhoda, that I have generally a spy in the enemy's camp. Mrs. Drake seconds all my plans so well, that when she is present, I have no fear that any of my wishes will be thwarted, without my being immediately informed of it, and the remedy is applied without loss of time."

"How admirable is all this!" said Rhoda, thoughtfully; and to do the *best* thing, seems to you to be so easy!—But this could not be, my dear Lady Randolf, even with all your excellencies, if you were not as largely gifted with the blessings of Fortune, as with those of Nature."

"Ah, Rhoda," said Lady Randolf, shaking her head, "from whence arises that observation?—Was not the 'well done,' the meed of him who had gained two pounds, as well as of him who had gained ten? It was only the unproductive one that was condemned."

"But it is only upon a large scale that so much virtue can be shewn," said Rhoda.

"Be *shewn*, I grant you," said Lady Randolf; "but are you thinking of what is exhibited, or what exists?"

"I ought to be thinking of the latter," replied Rhoda, colouring.

"If *to be* pre-eminently virtuous, will content your vast ambition," said Lady Randolf, smiling, "I will shew you in the example of the wife of our parish priest, that there is no station, however lowly, which can in itself prevent you from being so."

"That would be an instance in point," said Rhoda, colouring still more deeply.

"No, not in point," said Lady Randolf. "Your prospects offer you every comfort and commodity of a sober life; but my poor friend is sometimes obliged to forego almost the necessaries of it."

"*Never*, I am sure," said Rhoda, "when you call yourself her friend."

"Rhoda, my dear," said Lady Ran-

dolf," with a trait of sensibility on her countenance, that was almost divine, "the beneficence of friendship itself is often felt by the liberal and sensitive mind, as another call upon it for resignation to the will of God; and the hand, which has been accustomed to be stretched out to give, shrinks involuntarily from the necessity of extending it to receive."

"Admirable Lady Randolf!" said Rhoda. "Surely you will some time make me what I ought to be. You must shew me your priest's wife, and I will copy her where I can;—but poverty!—obligation!—There is nothing exhilarating in the virtues, that such instruments put in action."

In the story of this "priest's wife," there was nothing uncommon. It was the every day tale of human existence. The brightness of the morning sun—the clouds of noon—the stars of evening—the manner in which these vicissitudes had been met, and borne, made all that was

extraordinary in her fate. But this manner had been so much out of the beaten track—partook so much of the ethereal spark—was so little soiled by the earthly material in which it was imprisoned, that Lady Randolf was justified in considering her as pre-eminently virtuous; and Rhoda could not but confess, that it was possible to array poverty, sickness, and sorrow, in robes of glory more resplendent, than any, ever worn by riches, health, and joy.

"It is wonderful!" said Rhoda.

"It is plain," said Lady Randolf. "It is done by the just balance of time and eternity."

The fortnight, passed at Temple Harcourt, was to Rhoda a fortnight of much happiness—of much reflection—and of some improvement. She thought that if she might enjoy the same advantages of fortune which distinguished its proprietors, it would not be difficult for her to emulate their virtues. Her heart gave an unequivocal preference to the

dignified order and cheerful urbanity of the household and society of Temple Harcourt, over the irregular magnificence, and malicious gaiety at Overleigh Park. To become the moving spring of so beautiful a machine, seemed to her, to be that which was most desirable in life. Her imagination revelled in the luxury of fancied benevolence, and grateful praise. No knight-errant ever redressed more wrongs, or bestowed more blessings, in the most successful career, than did Rhoda, in the visionary station of mistress of a large establishment:—the arbitress of the happiness and amusements of all who approached her! She was blind, however, to the principle from which all this fancied excellence sprung. She called it benevolence—it was in fact vanity. She was not aware that these enchanting visions had all a reference to self;—that self-love was the parent of them all. If the scene had shifted ever so slightly—had she supposed herself the worshipper, instead of

the idol, her fabric of felicity had been shaken to its foundation. It was her wish to *appear* excellent, rather than the desire to become so, that thus bewildered her brain, and seduced her heart. There was no activity in her imagination—no emulative longings in her feelings, when she contemplated the exertions, the resignation, the cheerfulness, the abandonment of self, which, in the wife of the poor clergyman, she had praised with so much verbal warmth. She would have been most truly willing to relieve her, but most reluctant to have imitated her. She would be a faithful servant, but she would choose her service; and with all her glow of benevolence, with all her energy of desire to confer happiness, there was one thing which "she lacked,"—humility! —This required of her, she too must have gone away sorrowful. She had not courage to suffer in oblivion—to do well, and be forgotten.

"As the wife of Sir James Osbourne,"

thought Rhoda, "I too, perhaps, might be a Lady Randolf: but I do not love Sir James Osbourne," said she;—"and I do love Mr. Ponsonby—and cannot I, even as his wife, be a Lady Randolf in miniature?"

To be the first figure in the group, was necessary to complete her picture of happiness; but whether the group was more or less numerous, seemed to her more indifferent. Here, then, for the present, the fluctuation of her mind rested: her lively fancy decorated her person and her parsonage with whatever drapery pleased her best; and having uttered, in a voice so low, as scarcely to be heard by herself, "an elegant sufficiency," she remained determined, on some future day, to become Mrs. Ponsonby.

CHAP. XI.

"There is a joy, when to wild will you laws prescribe,
When you bid Fortune carry back her bribe."

Dryden.

HAD Rhoda been fortunate enough to have remained longer under the influence of Lady Randolf's virtues, this resolution would have gathered strength, and would at length have been fixed on such good grounds, as would have preserved it unshaken by all the convulsions of that heterogeneous world, into which she was about to enter.

Rhoda could talk to Lady Randolf, with freedom and pleasure, of Mr. Ponsonby; for Lady Randolf had marked him with so favourable an eye, the single day in which she had seen him, that

Rhoda had no apprehension that her taste, any more than her principles, could be called in question by the preference which she avowed for him. Lady Randolf had said, and Rhoda had treasured up the words in her memory, that "she had never seen a more intelligent and prepossessing countenance—more unaffected gentlemanlike manners;" and she had added, "Lord Randolf assures me, that he is well stored with all those acquirements, which, though beyond the appreciation of a female, are felt, even by our sex, in the accuracy of expression, and the elegance of illustration, that they give to the common topics of discourse." "Lord Randolf," thought Rhoda, "will become as dear to Mr. Ponsonby, as Lady Randolf is to me. Mr. Ponsonby will be regarded as partially by Lord Randolf, as I am by Lady Randolf. What a happy prospective for our future society!—How sincerely do I wish that I might

remain at Temple Harcourt, until I could remove to the parsonage of Mr. Ponsonby!"

But in vain did Rhoda wish: The moment of departure was arrived. Mrs. Strictland's patience could hold out no longer. No longer could she exist in a society where her talents found not a single occasion to display themselves.—Here was no field for intrigue—no party spirit—no display of sentiment—no charitable subscriptions, which tax the poor, and save the rich—no rivalries in dress—no importance given to trifles;—the green shawl, or embroidered handkerchief, might be worn, or laid aside, without drawing any observation; and though by the smooth monopoly of politeness, she glided along unmolested, she felt, that it was not *her* remark which was listened to—*her bon mot* that was repeated—*her* opinion that was sought. In vain did Mrs. Wilson pour forth a double portion of flattery, which the testiness of her lady made her *feelingly* discern to

be necessary;—in vain did Rhoda, happy herself, exert all her powers to make Mrs. Strictland so:—all would not do. Distinction, the aliment without which she could not live, was not there, and without it, all the balm of benevolence, and all the savour of intellect, were tasteless and unprofitable.

After having repeated a hundred and a hundred times, that Temple Harcourt was paradise;—that Lord and Lady Randolf were as our first parents, before they fell;—that all was admirable! charming! sublime! she peremptorily declared that she must return to town the next day; and that she would not listen to any objection which either Mr. Strictland or Rhoda could make.

"My dear Rhoda, it would be so extraordinary, so out of all rule, to prolong a first visit beyond a fortnight!—It is not to be thought of. What we have already done, is preposterous."

"But when to prolong our visit," said Rhoda, "would give pleasure to all

parties, why should it not be done? Why should it be preposterous?"

"My dear, when will you learn to understand such things?—How can you mistake the necessary politenesses of life, for the real inclination of people? Lady Randolf no doubt is very happy to have had us with her.—*Entre nous*, it can scarcely be otherwise; but there must be civilities to be done to others; there must be management, contrivance: you have no notion how much arrangement is necessary to answer all the demands that are made upon rank and fortune in society; and Lady Randolf is not, I am persuaded, the person to neglect any thing of the sort.—The fiat is absolute—we go to-morrow."

This was a resolution that Lady Randolf's notions of the duties of politeness would not have led her in the least to oppose, had Mrs. Strictland been alone concerned; but the virtues that she loved, and the imperfections that she lamented, in the character of Rhoda,

made her equally unwilling to lose sight of her. She saw the influence that she had gained over her mind; she beheld the struggles of the good and evil principles which were so busy within; she felt that the happiness and respectability of Rhoda's future life probably depended upon the conduct and event of the next six months.

"If I could retain her with me till I go to town," said Lady Randolf to her husband, "and watch over her during the first impressions that its seductions will make upon her mind, this young creature might be made as excellent as she is lovely; but with such a preceptress, and such an example as Mrs. Strictland, where will she find a balance to her own ungoverned fancy, and ardent desire of distinction?—She must, she will be lost."

"We will not part with her," said Lord Randolf.

"Not if it be possible to keep her," replied Lady Randolf; "but I much

doubt this being the case,—Miss Strictland is designed this winter to be the exhibition which is to fill Mrs. Strictland's assemblies, and open to her every door, which she wishes to enter. I doubt whether she would forego such an advantage to make Rhoda a duchess; I am sure she would not, to make her a saint."

"Let us try, at least to keep her with us while we remain in the country," said Lord Randolf. "I do not fear any reluctance on her part."

"There is none," replied Lady Randolf: "at present she has chosen the better part.—She has no wish so fervent as to continue here; but if she once goes, I will not engage that she will be equally eager to return."

"She shall *not* go," said the kind-hearted Lord Randolf: "a few weeks of your precepts and example," added the fond husband, "will fix all her virtues; and she may then as safely adorn the world, as you may yourself."

"Oh thank you for the compliment!"

said Lady Randolf; "and now let us try our united strength upon Mrs. Strictland."

"But how will it be possible to fasten any argument upon a mind so hardened by selfishness, and so polished by politeness?" said Lord Randolf.

"It will indeed be difficult."—

They found it to be impossible.—

Mrs. Strictland, having overwhelmed Lord and Lady Randolf with assurances of the high honour done her,—of the inexpressible pleasure that she should have had in complying with so flattering a request,—of the incalculable advantages which would result to Rhoda from remaining at Temple Harcourt, concluded with her regret and despair that the thing could not be."

"We will restore her to you in less than six weeks," said Lady Randolf.

Mrs. Strictland replied in the sweetest tone imaginable, "that she was *au desespoir*, but that it was *impossible.*"

"Why impossible?" said Mr. Strict-

land, who thought of the addition that one more to his table would make to his butcher's bills—"why impossible?—Six weeks?—What are six weeks? There will be hardly any body in town."

"It *is* impossible, Mr. Strictland," said Mrs. Strictland, with a frown that belied all the pretensions which she had before made to sweetness of temper; "and I am sure that Lady Randolf will not press farther a request, that she must do me the justice to feel must have been even more gratifying to me, than to herself, if it had been *possible.*"

Lady Randolf, thus silenced, had nothing to do but to acquiesce; and poor Rhoda, who had stood by with a palpitating heart during this discussion, had now nothing better to do, than to wipe away the tear, which, in spite of herself, would force itself into her eye.

When she and Mrs. Strictland were alone together: "My dear," said she, "you had no cause to have been so much alarmed. Though I spoke so

gently, you might have seen from the first that I was absolutely determined. Really the selfishness of people is quite amazing! That Lady Randolf should suppose I would resign you, my love, for six weeks!—I who love you so tenderly! Or to think that I should have no attention to your interests! What could you get by being shut up here the next six weeks? Or indeed to suppose that you could have borne to have left me? These very good people, I find, can pursue their own gratification as eagerly as others do. And what was all this fancy of moping you here in the country? Nothing on earth but a resource against a *tête à tête*; for Wilson tells me there is no more company expected after we are gone. I thought indeed that it was not in either Lord or Lady Randolf to keep it up long, not like our charming friends the Morrises."

Rhoda was happy that the entrance of this same intelligencer-general Wilson, precluded all necessity and almost all

possibility of reply; for Mrs. Strictland had so many orders to give, and so much joy to express on her approaching escape, that Rhoda slunk unnoticed away, and going to Lady Randolf, endeavoured to profit by all the hours in which she could still hope to enjoy her company.

The parting was sad: for Rhoda, according to her usual custom, gave all her feeling to the event of the moment.

"Oh my dear Lady Randolf, shall we ever meet again?"

"In less than six weeks, my love," replied Lady Randolf; "and then it will not be my fault, if there passes a single day without our seeing each other."

"Seeing each other!" repeated Rhoda. "Ah, what is seeing each other in crowds, in bustles, without the power of exchanging more than a word, and that word perhaps not daring to tell what the heart feels? How much shall I regret our *tête à têtes*, our continued conversations!"

"Even in London, we may perhaps,

not unfrequently have them," replied Lady Randolf; "but you will have more to do, than to say when in town; and you will find, though each may be equally good, in their different ways, that the pleasures of London, and the country——"

"Oh, I hate the thoughts of the pleasures of London!" interrupted Rhoda: "and what have I, who am to be a country parson's wife, to do with them?"

"If you use them wisely," said Lady Randolf, "they may form no unimportant share of your future blessings Those only can justly estimate the world, who know it—and in that estimate lies the secret, if secret it may be called, of more than half our virtues, and nearly all our happiness."

"Adieu!" said Rhoda, with a full heart and a broken voice, for Mrs. Strictland was already in the carriage, and called aloud, "that her dear Rhoda

would certainly catch cold, if she stood longer in the draft of the hall-door."

Lady Randolf embraced her—Lord Randolf saluted her, and led her to the coach:

"Now, my dear Miss Strictland," said he, in a whisper, as he put her into the carriage, "remember the admonition of your nursery maid, and be a good girl!"

"My dear Rhoda," said Mrs. Strictland, "these tedious adieus are really the most rustic things in the world. Cannot you be glad or sorry, without letting every body see that you are so?"

"I think I would not, if I could," replied Rhoda.

"Then, my dear, you will make yourself very ridiculous," said Mrs. Strictland.

"Ridiculous!" said Rhoda.

"It really afflicts me to be always reproving you, my love," said Mrs. Strictland; "but I wish that you would correct yourself of that awkward trick which you have, of repeating my words—and

indeed the words of others too—I do assure you, it is very ill-bred, and gives a jerking kind of tone to conversation, totally incompatible with the even flow of intercourse which distinguishes polished society."

"It is a very natural, and very impressive figure of speech notwithstanding," said Mr. Strictland; "and while we continue to have hearts, I cannot see why we should not express their feelings."

"It is not *l'usage du monde*," replied Mrs. Strictland contemptuously,—"I hope that Rhoda will not continue it."

"This *l'usage du monde*," returned Mr. Strictland, who, vexed to have been obliged to quit Temple Harcourt, revenged himself by an unusual loquacity of contradiction;—"this *l'usage du monde* is the greatest tyrant upon earth: we hold our pleasures, our opinions, our very existence, by her sovereign will and sufferance; and yet are such willing slaves, that we should be ashamed not to wear her chains."

Rhoda thought that she had never heard Mr. Strictland speak so well before; but Mrs. Strictland, with an affected yawn, said,

"Very true, my dear: you speak like an oracle; but I will assert my freedom: and so in spite of the tyranny of this same usage, which forbids sleeping in company. you shall see me go to sleep."

This determination imposed silence on her companions, and left Rhoda free to range in thought over all that was passed, and all that might be to come. The future no longer presented to her imagination a scene of unchequered delight as when Mrs. Strictland first disclosed to her eye the magnificence and pleasures that would await her in town: nor was it shadowed with the gloom and despair to which she had resigned herself, when, with a newly awakened passion for Mr. Ponsonby in her bosom, she was torn from the calm delights, and the beloved friends of her youth, and conveyed to London in a

mail-coach. A little of the world, into which she was going, she had already seen; and she did not want acuteness to discover that its pleasures owed their currency rather to their stamp, than their value.—They were rather the objects of her ambition than her taste; and could it be known that she had refused, she felt that it would not be difficult to forego them.—But Lady Belmont's words, "If those that *should*, *won't*, those who *will*, *may*," hung upon her memory, and had more influence over her feelings, than the sterling observation of Lady Randolf, "It is not Lady Belmont's strength, but your weakness that makes the evil."

Thus, with a full determination finally to adhere to Mr. Ponsonby, there was a lurking wish in the heart of Rhoda, to hear once more the flatteries of Lord William St. Quintin, and to see Sir James Osbourne again dependant on her smiles for his gaiety and good humour.

But this is not being " a good girl," thought Rhoda,—" and I *will* be a good girl—my dear Lady Randolf shall see that I will--she shall see when we meet, that I have been " a good girl!"

CHAP. XII.

"Too cold to feel, too proud to feign,
For him you're young and fair in vain;
In vain to charm him you intend,
Self is his object, aim, and end."

Moore.

In this virtuous resolution, Rhoda remained till her arrival in London,—Here every thought, every resolution, every feeling was lost in the whirlwind of bustle and arrangement, in which she found herself instantly involved.

The house which, a few weeks before, had appeared so blank, so deserted, so comfortless, now displayed all the activity of preparation to render it brilliant, populous, and luxurious.

Every apartment exhibited all that elegance could imagine, and more than

accommodation could require — every apartment but—her own. She sought her little garret, and found it still fireless and unfurnished—but the moment of peevish fastidiousness was passed.—In the scenes, which she believed were now opening before her, she doubted not but that she should find indemnification for any little home incommodities, and she felt that it would be at any moment at her own option to exchange them for all that Fortune could give.

Mrs. Strictland found her table covered with cards of invitation to numerous and various scenes of festivity—and while Rhoda conceived that it would be impossible to accept one half of them in the course of the longest season of pleasure's reign, she was astonished at the rapidity, with which Mrs. Strictland classed and arranged, divided and sub-divided their different attractions and claims, until she had reduced the whole to so manageable a mass, that even Rhoda herself saw

there would be no difficulty in shewing herself at all. "And to *shew herself* was all," Mrs. Strictland assured her, "that was necessary—for," she informed her, "that she never remained a minute longer in any place whatever, than while she was amused."

"In one respect at least then," said Rhoda, "the duties of society are more easily performed in London, than in the country. There, when once fixed, we must stay till the clock strikes the legal hour of release."

"In all respects, my dear, you will find them much easier," replied Mrs. Strictland: "it is so much less difficult to *seem* than *to be.*"

"But surely not so satisfactory to one's own mind,"—said Rhoda.

"Oh, my love, we are not talking of the mind," said Mrs. Strictland; "we are only thinking how we can get on in this crowded and jostling world—and just now there is nothing that I think of half so much as the ball that I shall

give on your *debût*; and from whence I prognosticate such grand results!"

"But you know I don't waltz," said Rhoda. "I doubt that will be found a great deficiency here."

"I would not have you waltz *now*, for the world," said Mrs. Strictland, hastily: "stay till you are married, and then do as you please."

"Must it not be rather as my husband pleases?" said Rhoda.

"I should fancy not," said Mrs. Strictland, carelessly—"but you must settle that between yourselves."

"I shall never waltz after I am married," said Rhoda, as she thought of Mr. Ponsonby.

"Oh, never fear," said Mrs. Strictland, "you will learn to wear your chains gracefully and easily—it is one of the lessons that the world teaches. But, my dear Rhoda, there is no time for discussion—I am on thorns till you begin your career—That I may not confound your rustic senses, I will proceed leisurely.—I will, as it were,

just steal you into the world, that the desire to know who you are shall precede the knowledge that you are at all."

Rhoda laughed.—"Really, my dear Madam, you would persuade me that I am a person of prodigious consequence."

"You may be so if you will," said Mrs. Strictland, with emphasis. "Well, I shall send Wilson to you—she knows where we shall appear to-night, and she will take care that your toilette is properly made."

Rhoda willingly resigned herself to the hands of this able architect—for she felt herself perfectly unknowing of all that she was to be, and of all that she was to do. The scenes, on which she was about to enter, had to her imagination, all the sublimity that indistinctness can give.—She was sure that they would resemble nothing she had ever before seen; but what they were like she could not conjecture.

To splendid apartments and well dressed men and women she had already

been familiarized, but she supposed that there must be something specific in a London assembly, which must distinguish it from every other collection of congregated human beings.

With a beating heart she followed Mrs. Strictland up the winding and steep stairs which led to Lady Ducan's drawing room—she entered it, and with one glance discovered that a London assembly was formed of the very same elements that compose the most common society.

The same cast of features—the same expression of mind she had seen and analyzed in a country fair—and as she moved on, the words that she caught, and the solicitudes that she observed, convinced her that the human heart is the same amidst the sports of a morris-dance, and the competitions of a drawing-room.

Absorbed in the remarks on others, she forgot herself, and stood still, or moved forwards, as the resisting or yielding crowd permitted, without taking

any other interest in the scene before her, than what arose from the succession of actors that appeared on the stage.

The whispered observations of Mrs. Strictland, who was endeavouring to make her way to the lady of the house, that she might introduce Rhoda to her notice, were unheard—for Rhoda, who was not recalled to a consciousness of self, by seeing one human creature whom she had ever seen before, had no ears but for the casual words that dropt from those who passed her—no eyes, but for the moving pictures which flitted before her.

Suddenly she beheld Lord William St. Quintin—and with an involuntary exclamation of joy, she was springing forward, when he saw her also, and with the cold profundity of his well made bow, nailed her to the spot on which she stood.

"Surely I am mistaken," said she; "I thought that had been Lord William St. Quintin."

"It is Lord William St. Quintin," replied Mrs. Strictland, "and what then?"

"I thought that he would have been glad to have seen us," said Rhoda.

"I dare say he is glad," says Mrs. Strictland; "but it is quite another thing meeting in town and in the country."

"In this then," said Rhoda to herself, "does the specific difference of a London assembly consist?"

But Rhoda had not yet lowered the tone of her feeling to the proper pitch for such an assembly. She was mortified—she was chagrined.

"Let us not part like strangers, lest we meet strangers too," had been Lord William's farewell words.

"We would not have parted as we did," thought Rhoda, "if I had suspected that so we should meet."

Lord William's experienced eye saw all that passed in the mind of Rhoda, and drew from it conclusions the most

flattering to his vanity. In a few minutes he was by her side; and with a voice and manner the most chilling, said,

"I am quite happy to have the honour of seeing you in town.—I hope Sir Frampton and Lady Morris are well!"

"I have not seen Sir Frampton and Lady Morris for some time," replied Rhoda, and passed on, leaving Mrs. Strictland behind, with whom, she perceived that Lord William entered instantly into the most easy and familiar conversation.

Rhoda was astonished.—She understood nothing of all this; and still less, when in a quarter of an hour afterwards, she heard Lord William reply to an inquiry of which she was conscious that she was the object, "the most lovely of her sex, as you see, my lord—but really that is all I know about her."

"What can all this mean?" said Rhoda to herself, as she repeated the

question to Mrs. Strictland, the moment they were alone together.

"It means," said Mrs. Strictland, "what I always told you, my dear—that Lord William is no marrying man—that the little gallantries which he shewed you in the country were *sans* consequence—but here, it would be quite another matter: were he to seem to appropriate you, as he means nothing, he would do you a real injury; and I am sure he is too much a man of honour to do that.—Indeed I do not know any man who has a more delicate sense of what is due to our sex, than Lord William St. Quintin."

Rhoda did not entirely concur in this opinion, but she was silent, ruminating upon her own vanity and the distinction between gallantry and real affection.—This train of thought was broken for a moment, by her entrance into the second temple of amusement, where Mrs. Strictland had decreed she should that night offer her devotions—but it was

only for a moment.—The sight of Sir James Osbourne, the flash of delight which spread itself over his countenance as his eye met her's, the hurried step that he made instantly to approach her—the sudden stop—the renewed, but chastised attempt to join her, all spoke in language not to be misunderstood, that his heart was truly her's, and offered a homage to her vanity, that seemed well worthy to obliterate the offence which it had so recently received.

"Lady Belmont," thought Rhoda, "may know that it is not all who *will*, that *may*!"

Sir James cast a fearful glance on every side where Mrs. Strictland and Rhoda stood, as if to ascertain that they had no follower—and re-assured by the result of his inquisition, he came forward and joined them.

"This is so unexpected a pleasure!" said he: "I did not know that you were returned to town."

"Only yesterday returned," said Mrs. Strictland; "and after all, I had some difficulty to bring Miss Strictland with me."

Sir James's countenance fell.

"Did Overleigh Park contain so many attractions?" said he to Rhoda.

"Its attractions, I believe," said Mrs. Strictland, "were never very great to Miss Strictland—and after you left us nothing could be more dull—oh, it fell off sadly---but we did not stay more than two days, and we ought to have come to town immediately---it was very inconvenient to me to remain so long in the country, but Lord and Lady Randolf absolutely constrained us by their obliging and flattering importunities to pass a little time with them at Temple Harcourt, and it was from thence that I found it so difficult to tear Rhoda."

"I wonder not at that," said Sir James, with pleasure in his accent; "I am sure," said he turning to Rhoda, "that all at Temple Harcourt must be to your taste."

Mrs. Strictland durst now trust the management of the conversation to Rhoda, being well assured that the genuine expression of what she felt, would better conduce to the forwarding of her own designs on Sir James, than if she were to take any share in the conversation herself.—She therefore moved on, and left Sir James and Rhoda as much *tête à tête,* and as much absorbed by each other, as if they had not been in the midst of two hundred other people.

This very abstraction was one of the instruments with which Mrs. Strictland intended to work.—She wished the world to observe, and Sir James to hear from that world, that he was in love with Miss Strictland; and she went on, silently accumulating all the words and actions by which she meant to overwhelm him, with the evidence of the fact, whenever the seasonable moment for establishing it should occur.

Nothing could go farther towards realizing this fact, than the conversation that Sir James was now holding with Rhoda. As she described all that had charmed her at Temple Harcourt, as she dwelt with fond and ardent partiality on the virtues, the talents, and the charms of Lady Randolf;—the order, the cheerfulness, the dignity of the domestic arrangements; Sir James thought that he beheld, in the lovely image which stood before him, the original of the picture which she was delineating.

Thus would Rhoda adorn his fortune—thus would Rhoda companion his domestic hours—thus would she delight his senses.—His eye darted fire—his tongue was on his lips, when the recollection of Mr. Ponsonby struck a sudden chill to his heart, and enabled him, for that moment at least, to retain his secret.

"You prefer then the society at

Temple Harcourt to that of Overleigh Park?" said Sir James. "I am told it is less gay."

"It ought to be much more so," replied Rhoda; "for I am sure it is much more happy."

"And is this paradise wholly the creation of Lady Randolf?" asked Sir James.

"Not wholly," replied Rhoda; "Lord Randolf has his full share, in producing the blessings that are communicated!".

"The blessings then depend upon the personal qualities of its Adam and Eve," said Sir James, "and cannot be in the power of any one to bestow, who cannot emulate their talents and their virtues?"

"But who, that has either taste or virtue, would not endeavour to emulate them?" said Rhoda.

"The Eve at least, I believe to be imitable," replied Sir James, fixing his delighted eye on Rhoda.

Rhoda blushed; and her rapid fancy

over-ran in a moment all that she *might* do, all that she thought she *would* do, if she were to be Lady Osbourne.

"It would be so delightful to make so many human creatures happy!"—thought she—and in the scheme of general benevolence, she forgot the justice that bound her to an individual.

"Lord and Lady Randolf spend much of their time in the country?" said Sir James.

"I believe they do," replied Rhoda; "and perhaps that is one of the means by which they are enabled to do more with their time and their money than most other people of their rank and fortune."

"But to live in the country without a decided taste for its occupations and pleasures—" said Sir James, examining with a searching eye the countenance of Rhoda.

"Surely," said Rhoda, "it can only be the idle and the dull, who have not a taste for both."

"Do you not think," said Sir James, "that in the country there may be a want of a particular kind of society, which those, who are least dull, could least forego?"

"I was speaking," said Rhoda, with a blush that Sir James certainly did not understand, "of that kind of country life, where superiority of fortune secures good society even in the country."

"And I," said Sir James, smiling, "was investigating whether there could be a taste so perfectly pure, as to make its possessor a fit inhabitant of that first paradise, where cities and society were not."

"Oh, never!—take my word for it," said Rhoda: "the experiment was made, and we know it failed."

Sir James laughed!—"Then your notions of the charms of a country life, are, a large house well filled with good society, breathing all the sweets of Arabia within, and without abounding with

every luxury of art and nature; and above all, with the means of quitting all these delights the moment you begin to be weary of them."

Rhoda laughed in her turn,—"No!" said she; "perhaps this might be my prototype of the 'best good thing below,' but it is not what I mean, when I talk of the delights of the country. It is the actual breathing the free air—the watching the simplest bud of nature disclose its beauties—the verdure—the trees—the silence—the sounds—the ranging far and wide without path to guide or fence to restrain—the feeling that all is good, and that man is the lord of all.—These are what I mean by the delights of the country."

"And would you enjoy all this alone?" said Sir James.

"Oh no, not alone—I have never enjoyed any thing alone—I don't believe that there is any thing that I could enjoy alone."

"How much depends upon the ques-

tion, whom would you chuse to be your companion?" said Sir James.

"Miss Wyburg has hitherto been my companion," replied Rhoda; "and my fancy cannot image one more to my taste."

Rhoda spoke this with the unaffected and unembarrassed manner of truth, for she spoke truth. The balance that her love for the splendors of the world held against her partiality for Mr. Ponsonby, kept him far away from making any part of her day dreams of happiness; and Sir James had never so pleased her imagination, as to give him any personal share in them.

"The tenement is surely uninhabited," thought Sir James; "oh, that I might be allowed to fill it!"

CHAP. XIII.

> " Who is so brave, so constant, that this coil
> Would not infect his reason ?"
>
> *Shakespeare.*

> " The young beauty soon began to taste
> The light vocation of the scene she grac'd."
>
> *Crabbe.*

The next morning, Mrs. Strictland declared her intention of *going a shopping.*

" Do you wish me to accompany you ?" said Rhoda. " If not, I should be glad to stay at home."

" I go almost purposely on your account, my dear," said Mrs. Strictland; " you must want such an infinity of things."

" My dear madam," said Rhoda, " do you recollect that I had every thing I wanted, six weeks ago ?"

" No, not every thing that you

wanted, even then," returned Mrs. Strictland; "but that was done all with so much economy. But now, my dear, I dare say, that you have scarcely any thing fit to wear?"

"Upon my word, madam," said Rhoda, "I do not recollect any thing that I want; and until I have paid my bill——"

"Pray, my dear," interrupted Mrs. Strictland, "let me hear no more of that two-penny-halfpenny bill; it is really not worth a moment's consideration. Now, I do assure you, that I cannot produce you, without a thorough renovation of your wardrobe; and I hope that you intend to do my ball so much honour, as not to be the worst dressed person there."

"I should be happy to do you honour in all manner of ways, my dear madam," said Rhoda; "but surely, while I am under your protection, it will not do, you know, to contract debts which I cannot pay."

" I thought that I had explained myself fully on this head, six weeks ago, my dear," replied Mrs. Strictland, " and that there would have been no return to so wearisome a topic. I said then, and I say now, that there is no person in the world, who, more than myself, would abhor to contract debts that I cannot pay; but I say also, that there are no debts that you can contract, which you may not pay, if you will; and I give you my word, that if any such should appear, *I* will discharge them. Will this make you easy? You cannot doubt my word?"

" Oh, no!—But why should I be a burthen?"

" You are the delight and joy of my life!" said Mrs. Strictland, kissing her forehead; " and so smooth that sweet brow; and away let us go down the stream of pleasure, which flows so invitingly before us."

" She is irresistible!" thought Rhoda; " but would not Lady Randolf say, that

it was my weakness, and not her strength, which made her so?"

"If you would not be very angry," said Rhoda, as they drove through the streets, "I would say, that if I must contract more debts, I would rather it should not be at the same shop, where I am already too deeply engaged. Is there no other that you approve as well?"

"What a little novice you are!" replied Mrs. Strictland, in the most good-natured tone imaginable. "Now, if you please, I will ask Mr. Hopkinson himself, if he would not rather trust you ten times more than he has done, than that you should go to another shop? Do you think, my dear, that when he looks at you, he can doubt whether you will pay his bill?"

"I am sure," said Rhoda, "he may see in my face my wish to pay his bill; but what avails the will, without the power?"

"He will see your power in your countenance, my dear," returned Mrs.

Strictland;—and speaking to the footman, she said, "We must drive straight to Hopkinson's."

Here the same scene was repeated, that had taken place when first Rhoda came to London, with more discrimination on her part, but with as little resistance; and this time, she had courage enough to say herself, when she had made her purchases, "You will add all to my bill, if you please;" but she said it with a fluttering heart, and a correspondent trembling in her voice, which might have told her, that the kind monitor within would yet befriend her, if she would listen to its whispers: but for such "a still small voice," she had no leisure.

Rhoda was now entered into the vortex of dissipation. The twenty-four hours of each day did not suffice to answer the demands that pleasure made upon her time: of rest, she required little—and of thought, less. The spring of youth and health, and her animal spirits, which

seemed to be inexhaustible, enabled her to go on her way, without weariness or languor, until she could do no more; but she then dropped into a sweet and refreshing sleep, for a few hours, and awoke renovated, and equal to fresh fatigue.

But while her physical powers were thus active, her intellectual energies appeared to be palsied. It could not be said that she ever thought;—she spoke, and she spoke with intelligence and acuteness; but this appeared as the inspiration of the moment, rather than as the result of reflection.

At the end of five weeks, she was confined to the house eight and forty hours with a cold. In these moments of enforced seclusion and retrospection, she was thunder-struck to find, that she had never once written to Frances, since her return to town, or once availed herself of the privilege allowed her by Lady Randolf, to apply to her on any

occasion wherein she thought that her advice might be of use to her.

"But has any such occasion occurred?" thought Rhoda. "Nothing out of the common way has happened; and I have done as others have done—as, I suppose, Lady Randolf must know, that all 'who live in a certain set in town,' must do. She forewarned me, that here, I should have more to do, than to say."

Rhoda was not quite satisfied with the apology which she made for herself, or with the adoption of a phrase, which she had often ridiculed, when she had heard it from the mouth of others, as a rule for her conduct.

"And after all," added she, "it is but for a moment. There is a time, as even Mrs. Strictland allows, when London is gone mad; but it lasts only for a few weeks, and then all are sober again: and shall I not be sober, when I am married, and settled in the country?"

Rhoda hardly dared to answer the question that now imperatively forced itself upon her—"Will this time ever come?"

There had not been a day in the last month, in which she had not spent several hours in company with Sir James Osbourne. She found him always the same—her ardent, her professed admirer; but not more explicit in the declaration of his future intentions, than he had been the first hour he knew her. She had never asked herself what these intentions might be: for whatever were the aberrations of her vanity, she implicitly felt that she was destined to be the wife of Mr. Ponsonby. Satisfied with the homage that her self-love received from the distinction paid her by Sir James, she had looked no farther; nor had she, in fact, any distinct impression as to what she wished: and if she had had any such impression, she was incapable of promoting her desires by art, or management. She saw little

of Lord William: sometimes cold and distant, he awakened her pride—sometimes adulatory and fascinating, he soothed her vanity, and gratified her taste.

"Would he be always what he can be," thought she, "how pleasant would be his society—perhaps, how valuable his friendship!—But I know him; and there is no dullness, no rusticity, that I would not prefer to such a companion for life. All I wish for, is, that I could shew him I could make such a preference. I would not have the world believe, that I take Mr. Ponsonby with all his virtues, and all his talents, only because that coxcomb Lord William has not offered me his hand!—'And what signifies what the world believes?' will my dear Frances ask, and Lady Randolf will echo the question—Why, I suppose nothing; and be it the business of these two dear friends to convert this supposition into conviction."

She wrote to them both; but without

entering into any details, imputing her silence only to the racketing life which she had been obliged to lead—declared herself thankful for the trifling indisposition which had a little interrupted her career—promised more punctuality for the future—expressed an earnest desire to Lady Randolf, that she should come to town; and while she closed her letter to Frances, without having once mentioned the name of Mr. Ponsonby, she concluded that to Lady Randolf, with an abrupt declaration, that, of all her estimable qualities, she envied her none so much, as her power of living to her own taste and feelings, rather than to those of others.

The period, that Rhoda had passed with so little exercise of intellect, had been one of much serious reflection to Mrs. Strictland. She had seen Sir James Osbourne resume his chains with an eagerness and pleasure, which had left her without a doubt that he meant

to wear them for life;—she beheld him daily at the side of Rhoda, by whom he was listened to with the most perfect complacency;—she had been congratulated by "her friends," on the important conquest that her *protegée* had made; and she had received these congratulations with the soft denial, which was a modest acknowledgment of their being well founded. Yet at the end of several weeks, she did not see herself advanced one step nearer towards the great question of matrimony, than when Sir James had departed in dudgeon from Overleigh Park. This could not much longer be suffered. She would lose all her reputation for management, if she permitted Sir James to keep off others, without appropriating the prize to himself. The crisis, she was resolved, should be at hand. The much-thought-of—the much-prepared-for ball, was to be given in a few days; and if Rhoda's charms did not that evening complete

her conquest, she was resolved to call upon Sir James for an explanation of his past conduct.

All these deep designs Mrs. Strictland kept carefully within her own breast: to have breathed them to Rhoda, she knew, would have been to have rendered them abortive. Rhoda might be seduced, but she was incapable of seduction;—she might ultimately decide ill for herself, but she would have disdained to have laid snares for others. The knowledge of this part of Rhoda's character, did not, however, awaken any apprehension in Mrs. Strictland, of any very formidable opposition on her side, to the accomplishment of her plans. She had watched with much, and may it not be added, with almost demoniac satisfaction, the increasing influence that the pleasures of the world, and the accommodations and draperies of life, daily obtained over the vaccillating mind of Rhoda. She perceived, that already the habits of society, which at her insti-

gation, had been assumed as ornaments, were becoming chains, that it would soon be next to impossible to break. Rhoda, who, on her first entrance into the world, had so often shocked Mrs. Strictland with the cold and absent air with which she listened to the frivolity and nothingness of the discourse that was addressed to her; and who had ridiculed the phrases, and criticised the jargon in which it was delivered, could now take her part in such inanity, without any symptom of disgust. She, like her companion, could talk of the "*changement de devocation*," as one of the businesses of life; and though she still laughed at the follies of others, she would have been ashamed to have been thought *incapable* of playing the *fashionable* fool herself.

Thus, without sharing in the principal motive which made the approaching festival so important in the eyes of Mrs. Strictland, it had sufficient interest with Rhoda herself.

She knew the importance that was annexed to the representation that she would make as the *object* of a *fête*, and was as desirous as Mrs. Strictland could be, that there should be nothing omitted which could contribute to her success. The fatal cold attacked her a few days previous, to the period fixed upon for the ball. Mrs. Strictland was in despair. Rhoda was vexed, and then laughed at herself for being so; yet she very readily complied with all Mrs. Strictland's prescriptions and restraints, and thought no sacrifice too great, which was likely to restore her health and bloom before "the great, the important evening."

This soon seemed likely to be the case; the cold betrayed no symptoms of obstinacy, and the cheek resumed its colour.

"And yet," said Mrs. Strictland, "it is so provoking!—for I had promised myself that you should have been the brightest star in the constellation, which

will be this night assembled at Mrs. Damer's."

"I thought it had only been a christening; and that is no very gay, or happy circumstance," said Rhoda.

"The name of a thing does not signify," said Mrs. Strictland. "Taste could make even a funeral charming; and there is, in fact, nothing in the little circumstances to which you allude. Nobody will think about Mr. Damer; whether he is in Holyrood House, or his own drawing-room, will be indifferent. All one's feelings are engaged for that delightful woman, his wife. I am sure nothing but my attachment to her could induce me to leave you thus alone, when I am afraid that you will so wish to be with us; but, poor thing! she has so many claims upon one's attentions. After so many years to bring the family a son and heir!—a matter so important even to general society;—for what would become of us all, if noble and ancient

families were to fall into decay? Oh! I fear that I must not, upon any account, disappoint her! Besides, she has really the best taste of any body in town; and the *fête*, on such an occasion, will be, I do not doubt, the first thing given this season."

Rhoda intreated that this benevolent attention to the feelings of Mrs. Damer, might not be sacrificed to any consideration for her; but it exceeded the power of her gravity, and all the advances that she had made in fashionable sympathy, not to see and to indulge in all the ridicule that compassion for a wife and mother, who gave splendid feasts, while the husband and father was in a gaol, was so well calculated to excite.

Mrs. Strictland assured her, that she saw the matter quite in a wrong light; but Rhoda continued to laugh, while they remained together, and might possibly, after Mrs. Strictland's departure, have begun to moralize, had not the ob-

sequious Mrs. Wilson succeeded to her lady, and engaged the whole of Rhoda's attention in many varied suggestions concerning drapery for the animate and inanimate substances, that were jointly to contribute to the ornamenting the important ball. It is true, that Rhoda could by no means partake of the senti ment of profound importance that Mrs. Wilson gave to these matters; yet she was not less desirous that the first should be a proof of her taste; and so intuitively did this taste catch the elegant, and the beautiful, that to suggest the *best* possible in every point, seemed scarcely to cost her a moment's thought. Mrs. Strictland herself willingly yielded to her hand the magic wand of decoration, and even stood astonished at the wonders which it produced.

END OF VOL. II. PART I.

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